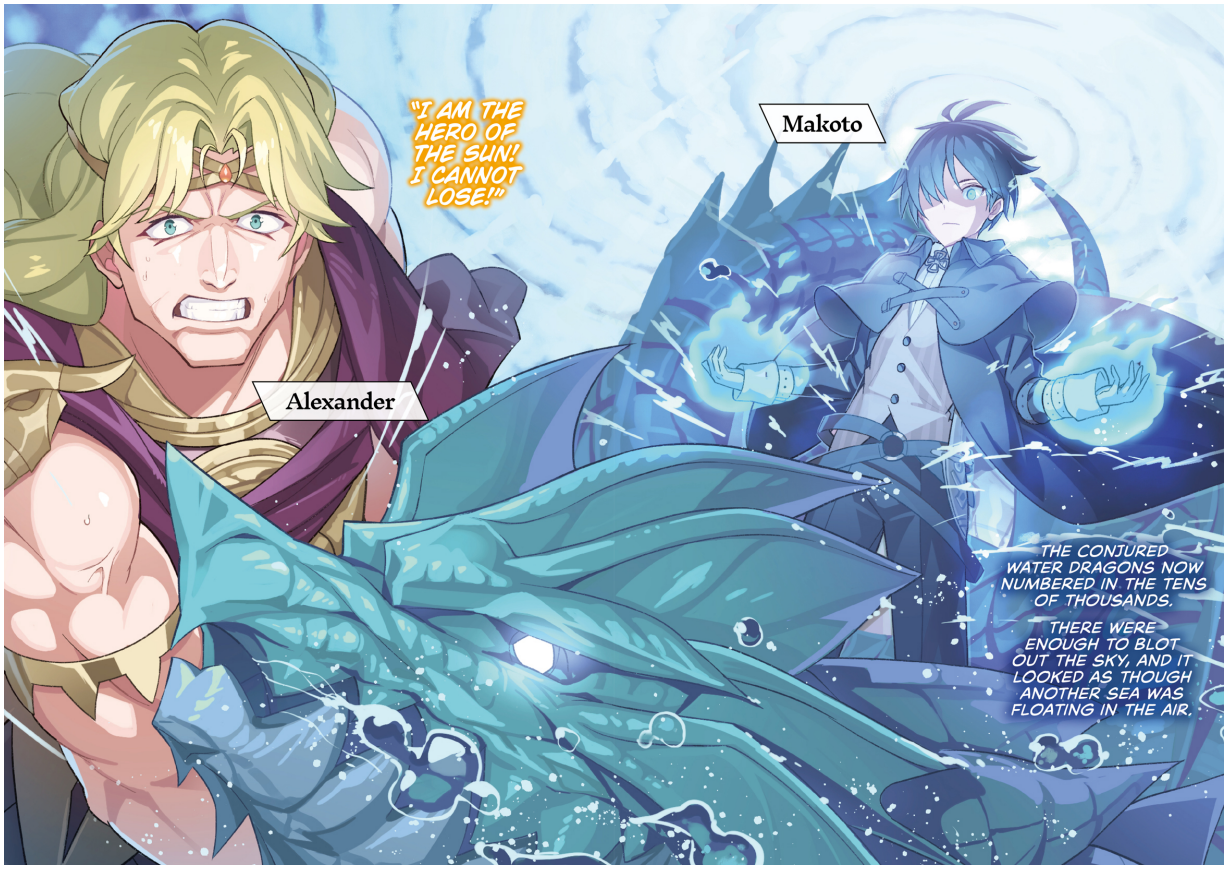
9
Story
Isle Osaki
Art
Tam-U
The Hero of the Sun and the Elemental Lord of Water
Full Clearing Another World under a GODDESS with Zero Believers

"CALL AND I SHALL COME FORTH! TA-DA!"
Full Clearing Another World under a GODDESS with Zero Believers
9
The Hero of the Sun and the Elemental Lord of Water
Story Isle Osaki
Art Tam-U
Noah


"I AM THE HERO OF THE SUN! I CANNOT LOSE!"
Alexander
Makoto
THE CONJURED WATER DRAGONS NOW NUMBERED IN THE TENS OF THOUSANDS.
THERE WERE ENOUGH TO BLOT OUT THE SKY, AND IT LOOKED AS THOUGH ANOTHER SEA WAS FLOATING IN THE AIR.

"LET'S ALL HAVE LOTS OF FUUUUN!"
Estelle
IRA—IN ESTELLE'S BODY—WAS SINGING AND DANCING ON THE STAGE.

Characters

Makoto Takatsuki

A high school game addict who found himself in another world. As Noah's only disciple, he is determined to full-clear the world to save her.

Makoto's Friends

Lucy

An elf from Springrogue who is good(?) with fire magic. Makoto's first party member.

Aya Sasaki

Makoto's classmate who was reincarnated as a lamia. She reunited with him in Roses's Labyrinthos dungeon.

Furiae

The Priestess of the Moon who was once captured by Highland. She forged a guardian knight contract with Makoto.

Fujiyan

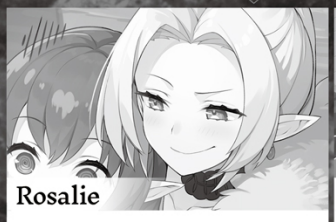
Makoto's classmate who founded the Fujiwara Trading Company in Roses.

Nina

A beastman fighter. Fujiyan bought her when she was imprisoned as a slave.

Springrogue

The majority of the country is covered in forest. Many elves and beastmen live there.



Rosalie

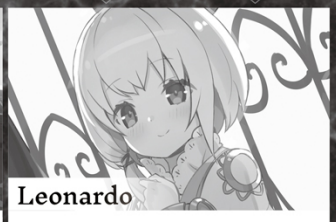
Lucy's mother, also known as the Crimson Witch. The strongest fighter in Springrogue.

Roses

A country blessed with many water sources. They are militarily behind the other countries.

Sophia

The Priestess of Water and princess of Roses. She gave Makoto the title of hero.



Leonardo

The prince of Roses. Chosen by the water goddess to be the Hero of Ice and Snow.

Highland

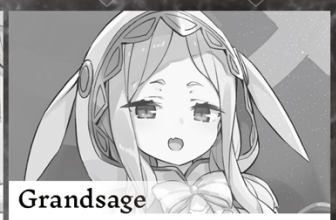
One of the leading powers on the western continent.
The largest country in terms of population, military strength, and financial strength.

Ryousuke Sakurai

Makoto's classmate and the Hero of Light. He has a strong sense of justice and is fighting against the demon lords.

Noelle

The Priestess of the Sun and princess of Highland. Sakurai's legal wife.



Grandsage

The best mage on the continent. Fought with Abel the Savior against the Great Demon Lord.

Gerald Ballantine

The Hero of Lightning. Born into one of the five Sacred Noble families. Sees Makoto as a rival.

Janet Ballantine

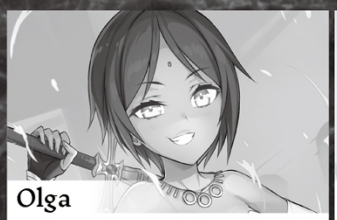
Gerald's little sister. Captain of the Pegasus Knights.

Saki Yokoyama

Makoto's classmate and Sakurai's wife.
A vice-commander within the Soleil Knights.

Great Keith

The majority of its lands are covered in desert.
Citizens excel in combat and the country has a powerful military.



Olga

The Hero of Incandescence chosen by the fire goddess. Enjoys fighting and sees Aya as a rival.

General Talisker

The person in charge of Great Keith's army. Olga's father.

Cameron

A powerhouse of international trade.
They have many casinos and financial institutions.

Estelle

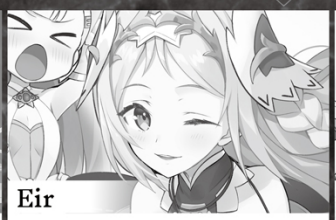
The Priestess of Fate. Has the ability to see the future and is thus very popular.

The Goddesses

The Sacred Deities currently rule the world after their victory during the last war.
Seven goddesses have dominion: Sun, Moon, Fire, Water, Wood, Fate, and Ground.

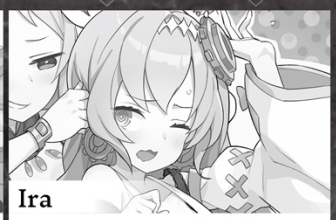
Noah

One of the Titanea overthrown by the Sacred Deities. Currently trapped in the Seafloor Temple.



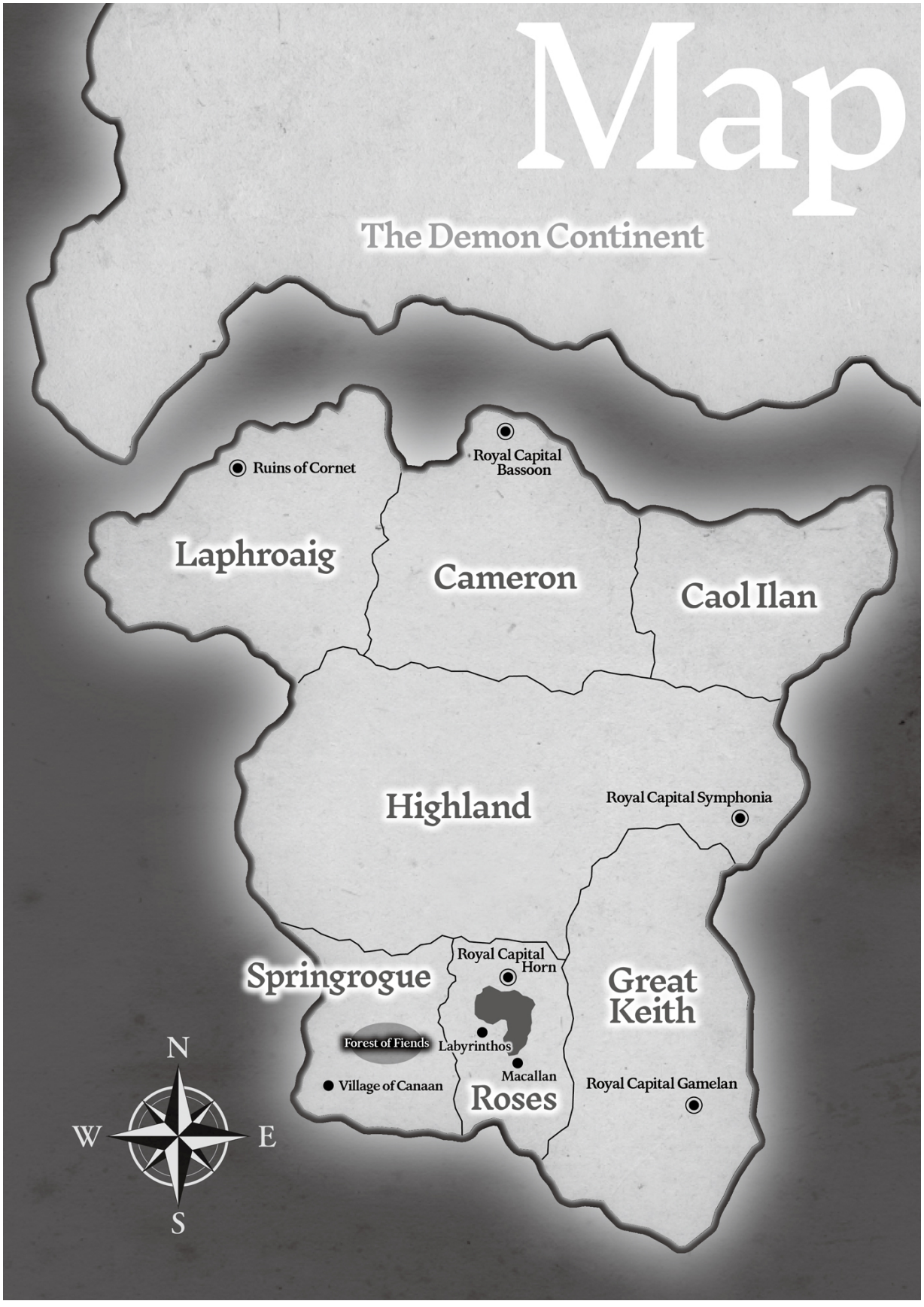
Eir

The Goddess of Water. One of the seven ruling deities. Despite her bright looks, she's actually a schemer.



Ira

The Goddess of Fate. One of the seven ruling deities. Proposed the Northern Front Plan to defeat the demon lords.


Map
The Demon Continent
Ruins of Cornet
Royal Capital
Bassoon
Laphroaig
Cameron
Caol Ilan
Highland
Royal Capital Symphonia
Royal Capital
Horn
Springrogue
Great
Keith
Forest of Fiends
Labyrinthos
Macallan
Village of Canaan
Roses
Royal Capital Gamelan
N
W
E
S

9 the hero of the sun and the elemental lord of water

CONTENTS

Prologue *Lucy's Musings*

Chapter 1 *Makoto Takatsuki Is Bored*

Chapter 2 *Makoto Takatsuki Is Shocked*

Chapter 3 *Makoto Takatsuki Heads for the Award Ceremony*

Chapter 4 *Makoto Takatsuki Despairs*

Chapter 5 *Makoto Takatsuki Awakens*

Chapter 6 *Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with a Saint*

Chapter 7 *Makoto Takatsuki Receives a Divine Revelation*

Chapter 8 *Makoto Takatsuki Steps Back a Millennium*

Epilogue *Hero Aya's Job*

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Character Profiles
4. Map
5. Prologue: Lucy’s Musings
6. Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Is Bored
7. Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Is Shocked
8. Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Heads for the Award Ceremony
9. Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Despairs
10. Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Awakens
11. Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with a Saint
12. Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Receives a Divine Revelation
13. Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Steps Back a Millennium
14. Epilogue: Hero Aya’s Job
15. Afterword
16. Bonus Short Stories
17. About J-Novel Club
18. Copyright

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Prologue — Lucy's Musings

◇ Lucy's Perspective ◇

"Look, Takatsuki! I peeled an apple ♡ Open wiiide!"

"Mmmm."

"Good?"

"Yeah."

"Eh heh heh! Eat up!"

Aya was feeding fruit to Makoto, who was currently lying in the infirmary bed. *No fair.*

"Say, mage," Furiae interjected. She was relaxing on the nearby sofa with Twi in her lap. "How long do we have to stay here?"

"Nrow, nrow."

"I suppose...until the ceremony?" My response came out somewhat questioning, and because I didn't really know the answer, I decided to keep it vague. "I think that's about a week from now."

At the moment, we were all shut away in the royal infirmary in Highland's capital. Our party leader, Makoto, was hospitalized... Or, that was the official reason for him being here. In reality, he hadn't wanted to attend the award ceremony that would commemorate Zagan's defeat. He'd tried to depart for Roses, but Princess Noelle and Princess Sophia had caught him trying to flee.

And so, Makoto had been admitted to the infirmary suffering from "magic fatigue." Technically, he *had* strained himself by using too much magic, so he was on bed rest. But...

"I'm bored. Gonna go solo some goblins," he announced before trying to slink out. By now, Aya had already caught and stopped him more than a dozen times. Even the doctors had told him to rest. He really needed to listen. Aya and I were so worried about him!

"No running, Takatsuki," Aya said firmly. "I'll chase you down wherever you go."

I nodded. “You won’t get away from my good hearing, even with *Stealth*.”

“You cheaters,” he said, slumping.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t run away from this.

The entire continent was abuzz with news of the Hero of Light’s triumph over demon lord Zagan. Highland’s position as the leading force in the alliance had been further solidified. But that’s where the problems started—the Hero of Light had said that he was able to defeat Zagan because the Hero of Roses had come to his aid. The Grandsage had backed up this telling of events, making Makoto’s participation seem even more vital.

It was different from the attention he’d gotten after the last battle—Makoto had indeed already made a name for himself in Springrogue by defeating demon lord Bifrons. However, no one had personally witnessed that, so the notoriety he’d gained had been relatively mild. In the end, the victory had been credited to a joint effort between Mama and Springrogue’s hero, Maximilian. Particularly harsh people had said that Bifrons’s death was only a matter of time—Makoto had just gotten lucky enough to be there.

This time, no one doubted his contributions. The otherworlder hero Makoto Takatsuki had been instrumental to the Hero of Light’s triumph over Zagan, and even the Grandsage had acknowledged it.

The Hero of Light was already going to be marrying into the Highland royal family. And now, people wanted the second hero, the Hero of Roses, to be just as successful. In other words, some aristocrats wanted Makoto to marry into their houses, thus gaining their family names a ton of prestige.

The nobles of Highland—no, of the entire *continent*—wanted Makoto.

It’d been decided that he would remain a patient in the infirmary until the awards ceremony was over. At least the nobility wouldn’t be able to proposition him while he was here...

◇ The Next Day ◇

“Princess Sophia! You should announce your engagement at the award ceremony!” Chris exclaimed.

She had come to visit us all in the infirmary, along with Princess Sophia and Fujiyan.

“Erm...” Princess Sophia looked uncomfortable. “Are you sure about that?”

“Indeed! You most certainly should!” Fujiyan exclaimed. “Already, there are over a dozen noble families surreptitiously attempting to contact him.”

“Well...” Princess Sophia turned, offering Aya and me a considerate look. “I cannot make such a decision solely by myself.”

It was true—Aya and I *were* technically engaged to him as well... I guess. Not that he acted like it.

“I don’t mind,” Aya chirped. “As long as I can be with Takatsuki.”

Despite her light tone, I knew how few connections she had in this world. That’s why “being with Takatsuki” was an absolute requirement for her. Sometimes, she scared me—she would wear this grim expression when she talked about what she would’ve done if she hadn’t met Makoto again.

“And you, Lucy?” the princess asked after a pause.

“I don’t mind.” Having him tied to Roses was way better than Highland taking him—Roses didn’t discriminate against elves. It was closer to home as well.

Although, I have to admit... I really want him for myself. He’s too damn popular now. Pisses me off.

“It does not bother me,” Fuuri remarked, though no one had asked her. “It has nothing to do with me.”

Reeeeeally? I wasn’t entirely sure about the truth of her comment, but I also didn’t feel like kicking that particular beehive.

Finally, everyone’s gazes went to Makoto. He stared back at us oddly, halting his water magic practice.

Did he...even realize what we’d been talking about?

“Makoto, were you listening?” I asked, obviously exasperated by how little he seemed to care about any of this. After all, it deeply concerned his future.

“O-Of course I was!”

He’d definitely been tuning us out. Princess Sophia walked over and took his hands, pulling him in close.

“Hero Makoto...would you be my husband?” She was adorable with her red-tinted cheeks and shimmering eyes.

Wait, she's proposing?! In front of everyone?! Why now? I was in shock—Aya's mouth had dropped open as well.

"G-Gladly..." Makoto answered.

Ah, damn him. He just got swept along by the moment. *Y'know, he's really weak to pressure like that!* If anyone pressed him for an answer, he'd just give them an okay right away! He hadn't even said it unambiguously!

It got me thinking though... When could *I* ask him?

◇ The Next, Next Day ◇

"Okay, Takatsuki!" Aya exclaimed. "Pull up your shirt and I'll wipe you down."

"Mhmm."

With his skin exposed, I could tell that he'd put on some muscle lately. When we'd first met, he'd been even spindlier than me.

"Wow, you've gotten way more buff since junior high," Aya gushed. "Like...around here." She ran a finger along his skin.

"That tickles, Sasa."

She was all over him. *No fair... I want to join in too.*

To distract myself, I turned to Fuuri. "Want to go out somewhere?"

"I don't have any acquaintances in Highland. Everyone I know is in this room."

"What about the Hero of Light?" I knew she was on good terms with him—he'd supported her while she'd been imprisoned by Highland.

"I won't be able to see him," she retorted. "Besides, *she'll* be with him."

"Princess Noelle?"

"Right. The princess who detained me."

Apparently, her affinity for the Hero of Light was matched in equal and opposite intensity by her loathing of Princess Noelle. I couldn't think of anyone I disliked that much.

Suddenly, in a moment with "speak of the devil" timing, someone else strode into the room. He'd been present at Zagan's defeat; he had come from the same world as Makoto, and they'd been friends as kids. This was the Hero of Light, Ryousuke Sakurai.

"Hi, Takatsuki. I came to see you. Looks like it's my turn."

"Ah, Sakurai," Makoto answered.

Two women followed the Hero of Light into the room.

"Heya, Takatsuki!" The knight called Saki Yokoyama gave a wave. "Things going well with Aya?"

"Good day, Sir Makoto," said Princess Noelle.

"Hi, Yokoyama, Princess Noelle." After offering his greetings, Makoto fixed his eyes on the Hero of Light. In a casual tone, he asked, "Hey, Sakurai—wanna go somewhere?"

"Somewhere? Uh, sure. With you, I'll go anywhere."

"Oh, *anywhere*?" Makoto grinned. Yeah, that was the face he always wore when he was about to say something stupid. "Then how's about we tackle the last dungeon, the Seafloor Temple?"

Almost everyone uttered noises of shock as they turned to Makoto. However, the Hero of Light just looked thoughtful.

"I only really know about Labyrinthos. Is the Seafloor Temple somewhere we can just go to on a whim?"

"It'll be fiiine," Makoto answered easily. "I'm not planning on clearing it yet... I just wanna scout things out. You defeated the demon lord, so this should be a piece of cake."

The Hero of Light nodded. "Okay, then."

"Y-You can't, Ryousuke!" Princess Noelle panicked, hurriedly stopping them in their tracks before they rushed off into peril.

I sighed. "Makoto...you can't take the Hero of Light somewhere so dangerous..."

"Takatsuki," Aya added sternly, "stop being silly and rest."

"Awww..." Makoto pouted and flopped back down onto the bed. "But Sakurai said it's fine."

"My knight..." Fuuri leveled him with a look of disbelief. "Did you really intend to delve into one of the last dungeons?"

Oh, he definitely did—there's no doubt in my mind that he wanted to go.

Word of his invitation had apparently reached Princess Sophia—she came rushing back to the room.

"Makoto Takatsuki!" she yelled. "What are you thinking?!" After that, she launched into a lecture. Her being angry pretty much went without saying. After all...

The survival rate for those dungeons was pitiful.

By order of his superior, Princess Sophia, he was forbidden from

challenging the Seafloor Temple.

◇ Even More Days in the Future ◇

Princess Sophia had come every day to see Makoto. She really loved him, huh? Though, I had a feeling that she might've just been keeping an eye on him—she had to make sure he didn't slip away.

General Talisker from Great Keith had shown up to visit, along with Maximilian. The Hero of Lightning had stopped by as well—Gerald Ballantine.

Makoto is incredible.

These were important figures wielding huge amounts of influence who were all famous across the continent. But...Makoto just complained to everyone, saying that he wanted to get out of the infirmary. He received some really worried looks in response.

Luckily, after that initial burst, the number of visitors calmed down. However, with less to distract him, Makoto was getting more and more restless. At least Aya was still forcing him to let her play nurse.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked.

"Hmm, kinda."

"I'll get you some juice."

She trotted over to the fridge. Yes, the fridge—it was something Makoto had made with elemental magic, and it was super convenient. *Maybe I should learn the spell for it.*

Soon, Aya walked back over to him. "Open wide."

"Mm, later." He was lounging on the bed practicing his magic—probably focusing on the spell.

"Jeez, you're so lazy! Guess I'll give it to you mouth-to-mouth."

"Yeah, sure."

Uh? That...sounded like a weird answer. Mouth-to-mouth? Nah, I must have misheard.

"Okay! Here I go!"

I heard a single gulp. Makoto let out a noise of pure shock, and my own voice sounded much the same. Makoto—who hadn't been listening to Aya's words—was about to get his juice. She'd put some into her mouth and was closing in on him.

“Wait right there!” I yelled. This was a hospital room!

I grabbed hold of her head.

“Hm?” I heard her swallow the juice, and then she started pouting. “Aw, you made me stop.”

I folded my arms and looked down at her. “Hey! What were you playing at?!”

She didn’t flinch at my tone and sent me a glare in return. “I wonder who snuck into the room last night for ‘training.’ Trying to get some ‘Synchro’ in with Takatsuki, huh?”

“Urk.”

How did she know?! I pivoted to look at Fuuri, who was playing with Twi.

“Yes. I told her.”

“Guh... I said it was a secret.”

“That wouldn’t be fair,” she retorted. Fuuri had used her *Future Sight* to see me trying to sneak into Makoto’s bed, and she’d stopped me. *I thought she couldn’t see the specifics well!*

“Luuuuu?”

“Urk.” The shoe really was on the other foot now... “It was just training! Makoto didn’t mind!”

Makoto shrugged. “I was half asleep.”

“Well, *this* is just nursing!” Sasa protested.

“Maybe you have been nursing him...” I conceded. “But you’re all over him all the time! It’s not fair!”

“It’s just mouth-to-mouth!”

“That’s *not* nursing!”

At that point, Fuuri cut off our squabbling. “Both of you, quiet down.”

Then, suddenly...

“I see things are noisy today as well.” We all turned to see that Princess Sophia had just walked in—without knocking. She’d really made herself at home.

“Princess Sophia!” Makoto exclaimed. He rolled out of bed and strode over to her, grabbing her hand.

“Wha?! Y-Yes? What is it?”

“I’ve got a request for you.”

It looked like the stress of the hospital stay had gotten to him again.

Not another *weird idea*...

Chapter 1 — Makoto Takatsuki Is Bored

◇ Princess Sophia's Perspective ◇

"Let's go out together," Hero Makoto insisted, tugging me along.

"What? But—"

"Hurry, hurry."

"R-Right."

His hand gripped mine firmly, and my cheeks felt like they were on fire. I used *Coldhearted* to take the edge off. Where was he taking me? H-He wasn't going to take me somewhere we could be alone and...have sex?!

W-We can't! I'm a priestess! I have to stay pure! Although...Lady Eir had said otherwise: "You can go all the way with Mako and stay a priestess!" *I wish she was a bit more dignified in her guidance... Still, I have her permission, so I wouldn't mind if— Wait, Sophia, what are you thinking?! How could you be so obscene?! I-If he really insisted though...I'd...*

"We're here."

"Huh?"

While I'd been lost in swirling thoughts, we'd reached our destination.

Before us, right next to Highland Castle, was a grand, magical house made of ice crystals. Its owner was perhaps the third most important person in Highland and the strongest mage on the continent.

This was the Grandsage's estate... *Why are we here?*

"Let's head in."

"Wait a moment!" I protested.

"What's up?"

That's not what you should be asking! Why did you drag me here*?! Shouldn't we go somewhere more secluded to— Wait, that's not what I meant!*

"The Grandsage is a rather asocial person. Have you arranged to meet with her today?" Getting her permission for a visit was frankly rare because

of her personality.

"Uh...nope?"

"What?"

He ignored my protests and opened the front door. "'Lo, Grandsage?"

"H-Hero Makoto?!"

He just said that he hadn't scheduled an appointment! To think...barging in on one of the most influential people in Highland...! I'd heard of noble families who'd been utterly ruined due to rudeness like this!

"W-Wait," I protested.

He didn't stop, just tugged me along.

"Sophia?" he asked in surprise.

"Let's head back! She'll be angry!" I whisper-yelled while tugging at his arm.

"Why are things so noisy out here? Who in the— Oh, Elementalist?"

Hero Makoto let out a soft noise of surprise—I yelped.

Right in front of us, there was a doll wearing a maid outfit. Yet, the voice coming from her mouth was unmistakably the Grandsage's.

"Do you have some free time?" he asked.

"I *was* sleeping... But fine. Come inside."

"Thank you."

I remained silent. He'd gotten permission (after the fact) so easily. Princess Noelle had mentioned it before, but the Grandsage really *was* soft on him... There were rumors that they were lovers, but gossip was unreliable. Those rumors were baseless...right?

This house was dark inside, with just the odd magic lantern giving off a dim glow. The doll—apparently, some sort of magical manipulation by the Grandsage—led the way. The farther we walked, the more nervous I got.

Back when I'd trained as a priestess, the Grandsage had been my magic teacher. However, it'd been pounded into my head from an early age that no one should ever try to go up against her. Frankly, she was terrifying... Even just talking to her scared me. I'd heard the same sentiment from Lady Noelle. *Surely we shouldn't be here so casually...*

I felt myself growing tenser as we walked, and soon, we entered a room.

"So you're here. Take a seat... Elementalist, you sit here." The Grandsage pointed to her side.

"Sure."

“Thank you for taking the time to see us, Grandsage,” I murmured.

“So, what did you want?” she asked, her eyes glowing unhappily. She rested a cheek on her hand.

Hero Makoto slipped into the seat next to her. “Well, you see, I have a bit of an issue.”

He’s sitting so close to her...

“Oh? You’ve certainly made a name for yourself by defeating the demon lord. I’ve heard constant talk of nobles asking for your hand. Poor Sophia.”

“N-Not at all...” I denied it verbally, but she was completely right about how I felt. Now that he’d shown everyone how valuable he was, *swarms* of nobles from Highland, Cameron, and Great Keith were after him. Though I was royalty, all of these families were far richer than mine—my stomach churned every time I considered what might happen if he had a change of heart.

“That was all Sakurai,” he replied. “I didn’t do anything to fight off Zagan.”

“You...” The Grandsage glared at him sharply. “Are you an idiot?”

I had to agree with her retort. Hero Makoto had brought the Hero of Light back from the brink of death, and he’d even saved the Grandsage from danger. If that wasn’t considered making a name for himself, then what was?

“I couldn’t fight off any of Zagan’s attacks. Honestly, I was more of a hindrance than anything.”

“Yet your spell restored the Hero of Light’s mana. That’s plenty to be proud of.”

“Well, whatever. That’s actually the problem: because you went on about my ‘exploits,’ I can’t even go outside!”

I felt all the color drain from my face. “Hero Makoto...what did you just say?!” I’d thought so in the past—he really didn’t shy away from talking back to powerful people. But this was taking things too far! I needed to stop things before the Grandsage got angry.

“Oh, you want to throw blame around?” The Grandsage scoffed. “What do you *really* want from me?”

“Can you just...use your influence or something so I can go outside? I can’t even leave the infirmary without permission.”

“Hmm. My ‘influence’ you say...”

She didn't show any sign of anger at his rudeness but simply folded her arms in thought. She'd been quick to punish insolence back during her days of teaching our class magic. *Mainly Sir Gerald...*

"Ah! What about this?" she asked, raising a finger. "Would you become my guardian knight?"

"Your guardian knight?" he parroted.

"What?" I asked while internally yelling the same. That had come as a real shock... She'd been alive for a thousand years, and I'd never heard anything about her taking a guardian knight. Her comrades had been Abel the Savior and Johnnie the Spellbow—no one could ever measure up to them. Her asking Hero Makoto was...an absurd honor.

"That's not happening, Grandsage."

"Hm? It's not?"

"Wh-Why would you turn her down?!" I blurted out. He'd just casually dismissed something so prestigious!

"I mean, I'm technically the Priestess of the Moon's guardian knight."

"Oh, that's right," said the Grandsage. "It is possible for you to be a guardian knight for two people at once. However, the contracts must not clash. What type of contract do you have with the moon priestess?"

"Type of contract?" he asked quizzically.

"You— Do you not even know the particulars of the contracts you are part of?"

"Hero Makoto...that isn't a good thing," I mumbled.

The Grandsage held out her hand. "Show me your Soul Book."

He sighed, handing it over. The Grandsage hummed as she inspected it.

"Hmm, a *Spoken Contract*. That is about what I expected."

"What kind is that?" he asked me.

"A contract agreed upon verbally," I answered. "It's the most minor type."

"Huh."

Considering the almost manic amount he trained his water magic, why did he not know these basics?

"There are five types of contracts, Elementalist. You are currently bound by two of them. If you are to become my guardian knight, we can use one of the other three," she explained. "No one will make a pass at you if you become *my* guardian knight."

“Two?” he asked. “But I’m only contracted as Princess Furiae’s guardian knight.”

“Contracts aren’t limited to knighthood,” I told him. “You are bound by a contract as your goddess’s disciple, no?” Had his goddess not explained that to him?

“I’ve...got a contract with Noah?”

“The contract between a goddess and mortal is a *Soul Contract*. The mortal offers their faith, and the goddess offers her blessings. It’s common sense...though with you being an otherworlder, I suppose you might not know.”

He nodded along. “So there are three other types, right? What are they?”

I listed them off. “*Blood*, *Body*, and *Spoken*.”

At that point, the Grandsage cut in. “With me...a *Blood Contract* should suffice. Each party simply needs to drink a few drops of blood from the other.”

“So the same as usual,” he commented.

“Indeed. Hup.”

“What?!” I yelped.

She had hopped onto his lap and circled her arms around his neck. He supported her with his own arms around her back. It was clearly something he was used to.

She then latched on to his neck, bit down, and began lapping at his blood.

“I thought a mouthful would be fine?” he asked.

“No. You’re supposed to be my guardian knight, are you not? You need to satisfy me.”

“Right, right,” he said. One hand was on her back while the other carded through her hair. Her arms were tightly wrapped around him. They looked...almost like lovers.

What...?

I felt a looming sense of unease. Someone of the Grandsage’s stature would never interact with a commoner like this. At least, that’d been my assumption. Was there really...nothing between them?

You took so long to notice, I heard in my head.

L-Lady Eir?!

You can’t let your guard down. Mako’s a natural Casanova.

A-A Casanova? What did that mean? Wait, that wasn't the important thing. Why was she speaking to me now? Was something urgent happening?

Hm? Nope, nothing urgent. I thought I'd just pull a Noah and chat ☆.

U-Uh?

More importantly, are you going to let her take Mako?

I couldn't even hear her after that. Lately, she'd been speaking to me much more casually. I was grateful for it, but it was also unnerving. It sounded like Hero Makoto's goddess was always doing that kind of thing. Didn't the nerves exhaust him?

"Now, lick my finger," demanded the Grandsage. "That will establish the *Blood Contract*."

"That feels kinda weird."

Before I knew it, they were done.

I heard her chuckle. "Now you are my guardian knight. I'll tell Noelle later and spread the word. I'll wager that very few nobles will try to take advantage of you now."

"Hooray!" he cheered. "I can go outside again!"

Right... Of course he didn't care about the honor of his new position or anything else that had to do with prestige. Considering how easily he'd agreed to the Grandsage's plan, did he even know the risks of making contracts? I sometimes worried about the basic knowledge that our hero seemed to be missing...

As these thoughts swirled around my mind, we thanked the Grandsage and left her estate.

Hero Makoto and I were walking back side by side, talking as we went.

"You really are an absurd person," I remarked.

"I am?"

Honestly, it felt like my heart had been about to stop. Now that that guardian knight contract had been enacted, one could certainly consider Roses and Highland more closely linked. However...

"The Grandsage was kind to us, but what would you have done if you'd angered her? As a hero, you should be more aware—"

"Sophia," he interrupted. "Do you fancy stopping somewhere to eat?"

"Listen to what I'm—" I paused, taking in his question. "Well...yes."

See! He was easily able to distract me.

“Okay then. What do you want?”

“Whatever you prefer is fine.”

“Great!” he said. “Let’s go to the place Fujiyan mentioned.”

At that, he grabbed my hand and started tugging me along.

W-Was he always this intense?

“Hero Makoto, you seem like you’re enjoying yourself.”

“’Course! It’s been ages since I’ve been free!”

“I see.” The forced stay in the infirmary must have been a source of stress.

I let him lead the way, and we soon arrived at a small bar in a back alley of the third district—the nobles’ district. I hadn’t known there was a place like this here. No other customers seemed to have arrived yet. *Maybe it opens later in the day.* Wooden tables and barrel-shaped chairs were set up around the space, lending it an atmosphere that would likely appeal to adventurers. Overall, it was completely different from the restaurants I usually frequented.

“I’ve never been to this kind of establishment,” I told him.

“He built it to evoke a commoners’ bar.”

“Built it?” Was the owner an acquaintance of his?

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, someone walked out.

“Sir, we aren’t yet open for— P-Princess Sophia’h?!”

“Oh,” I replied, looking at the rabbit-eared woman. I recalled that she was one of Hero Makoto’s old friends. “You are Lord Fujiwara’s wife, Nina, no?”

“Hey, Nina.”

“Mister Makoto’h! If you were going to bring someone like the princess, you should have told us first’h!”

“Ah, my bad. You aren’t open yet? We can come back later.”

“I’d be in trouble if I just sent a princess away with nothing’h!” she exclaimed. “Hang on—I’ll be just a moment’h!”

Soundlessly, she vanished into the building.

“Whoops,” Hero Makoto muttered.

“You are far too haphazard.”

He slumped over a bit. “Sorry.”

“Y-You don’t need to be so down,” I stammered, quickly trying to cheer him up. “Just be more careful next time.”

“My esteemed Tackie! Lady Sophia! Welcome!”

Hero Makoto’s face immediately brightened. “Oh, hey, Fujiyan.”

*Was he just...*pretending *to be upset?*

“This is a bar intended for the nobles of Highland—here, they can lighten the load of formality!” Lord Fujiwara announced excitedly. “Please, enjoy yourselves!”

“We’ll take whatever you recommend.”

“Leave it to me! However...in the future, please inform me of your visits ahead of time.”

Hero Makoto paused for a moment, then once again said, “Sorry.”

Even his friend had been unhappy with this spontaneous dropping in. *Well, that makes perfect sense.* Our meal ended up being a creative mix of cuisine from both Roses and Highland, and it was delicious. I also enjoyed the time I was able to spend talking to Hero Makoto. On the whole, I was satisfied.

Once we were done, we returned to the infirmary.

“You’re late,” Lucy griped. She was sitting on the bed braiding Aya’s hair. “We already ate.”

“Where’d you two go?” Aya asked.

Lucy and Aya really did seem to be close, though they clashed on occasion when it concerned Hero Makoto’s affections. *I suppose that’s one facet of being such good friends—they can fight and still maintain a positive relationship.* I had no such acquaintances, and honestly, I was somewhat jealous.

“To see the Grandsage,” he answered.

“Hero Makoto became the Grandsage’s guardian knight,” I added. “I could feel my life slipping away.”

Aya offered a considering “Hmmm” while Lucy exclaimed, “That’s amazing, Makoto!”

I sighed and began to explain what had happened. But then, I was interrupted by a voice from the door.

“What?”

A metal bowl fell to the floor with a clatter. I whipped my head around to stare at the source of the sound—the Priestess of the Moon was standing there wearing a dazed expression.

“Nrow!” Twi hissed as her food was scattered all over the floor. She still

started gobbling it up though. *Cute.*

"Wh-Wh-What...did you just...say?" Her voice was shaking. She could barely get the words out.

It was the first time I'd seen her so flustered. However, Hero Makoto didn't seem to notice. He spoke to her with the same expression as ever.

Not fair. He's always so calm.

"I'm the Grandsage's guardian knight now."

"You traitor!" she yelled, grabbing him tightly.

◇ Furiae's Perspective ◇

Ahhh, it's so peaceful.

I exhaled a soft breath, looking out of the window and stroking Twi, who sat on my lap.

Things had been quiet since Makoto Takatsuki—my knight—had been admitted to the infirmary. The time leading up until now had been awful though. Zagan's army had invaded from the demon continent. My knight and Ryousuke had worked together to defeat him. Of course, the biggest threat—Iblis, the Great Demon Lord—was still waiting in the wings. The world was still on the brink of ruin.

But something's shifting... Recently, my Future Sight *has been constantly wrong.*

My *Fate Magic* had been of very little use since I had met my knight. Due to his influence, the rebellion in Highland's capital had been gracefully averted. Demon lord Bifrons's resurrection in Springrogue had never truly come to pass. Even the future I'd seen of us losing against the demons had been all wrong.

Again, all of this had been due to my knight's interference.

At this rate, the future I'd witnessed—of Iblis's return and the Hero of Light's murder—might not come to pass either. I'd grown *that* optimistic.

In the past, I'd loathed the world and its oppression of cambions. I used to think it could all just be destroyed. But now...I'd started to consider that this world wasn't so bad. *I wonder when my thinking shifted...* The answer to that was almost certain—that strange guardian knight had prompted my change of heart.

At first, I'd been sure he would dissolve the contract immediately. After

all, no one would want to be the guardian knight of the cursed priestess for long. But I didn't feel that way anymore. Everyone in his party was a good person, and despite my curse, they didn't avoid me. My knight seemed completely uninterested too...though I might've wished for him to acknowledge it a little.

"Nrow, nrow," mewled Twi from my lap as she batted at my arms. Apparently, she was hungry.

"What a greedy beastie you are. Wait a moment—I'll get you some food."

I hadn't even noticed it happening, but *I* was the one taking care of her now. Wasn't she my knight's familiar? She didn't act like it at all. Hadn't he accused me of stealing her? It made me laugh slightly to remember that.

I dug around in our belongings and retrieved the cat food the merchant Fujiwara had provided, then tipped some into a silver bowl.

Look at the luxuries you get. This is all thanks to his efforts, you know. You should at least show him some affection.

"Nrow, nrow, nrow!" Twi pawed at my legs, trying to get me to hurry up.

Honestly, what a gluttonous cat. I walked back toward the main room. My knight and the princess of Roses were talking. *Oh, they're back.*

Suddenly, I overheard something that made me freeze.

"Hero Makoto became the Grandsage's guardian knight."

What...? Ridiculous. H-Hold on! That's not true, right?! He didn't say anything to me! I must have misheard. I must have!

My hands were shaking. Was I being thrown away?

Distantly, I realized that Twi's bowl had fallen to the floor. My mind couldn't have been further from it.

In a daze, I searched out Makoto Takatsuki.

"M-My knight?"

His voice seemed wholly unconcerned when he said, "I'm the Grandsage's guardian knight now."

This impudent fool!

All at once, I felt heat flare in my mind.

"You traitor!"

I leaped at him, straddling his torso, digging my fingers into his skin, and (apparently) trying to wring his neck. The mage and warrior grabbed

me and hauled me off. The event was hazy in my memory, and I didn't really remember exactly what'd happened.

A while later, I calmed down.

"What?" I asked. "You're still *my* guardian knight as well?" *I suppose there had been no need for the shock...*

"See, no problem," my knight proclaimed, cool as a cucumber. *Just how bad can he be?*

"The problem is that I didn't know anything about it..." l said after a moment, pouting at him.

"Why would you just become someone's guardian knight so easily, Makoto?"

"Takatsuki, you should have talked to Fuu first."

"Hero Makoto, internal conflict isn't good for a party."

The mage, warrior, and princess were on my side. My knight looked awkwardly away.

That's what you get.

"I will go and tell Lady Noelle about this." The princess sighed, then took her leave.

"Since we're in Symphonia, I want to head to the church in the ninth district," said the warrior.

"Oh! That's where Emily was raised!" exclaimed the mage. "I'll go too."

The two of them also proceeded out the door.

"Wait!" my knight called out. "What about adventuring?"

The warrior shook her head. "No way, Takatsuki."

"You should rest," added the mage.

He deflated at their refusal. Maybe they were irritated about the guardian knight situation as well—not nearly as angry as me though.

Before long, only my knight and I were left in the room.

"Maybe I'll go walking 'round the town," he mumbled to himself.

Hmph, so he's going right back out.

"Want to come with?"

"Why does that sound like such an afterthought?" I demanded.

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

"I didn't say that." *You'll need to take responsibility for the shock earlier!*

And so, the two of us headed out into Symphonia.

"What...is this place?" I asked.

The shining gold building in front of us was enormous—it was certainly eye-catching.

"The Grand Highland Casino. Shall we head in?"

"A casino...?" I asked. "Do you gamble?"

The woman who'd raised me when I was young had always warned me that men who liked to gamble were trash. She'd apparently been taken in by someone like that in the past.

My knight didn't answer and just headed for the entrance.

"'Lo," he greeted the guard there.

"Hey, mister, we're a casino! If you want in, you're gonna need to bring some money to—" He stopped, staring wide-eyed for a moment. "S-Sir Makoto?!"

The man had been intimidating at first, but he'd suddenly changed his tune.

"Can we head in?" my knight asked. "Um, I've got Peter's badge here."

"O-Of course! Please, go on in!"

"Is Peter here?"

"I'll send for him!"

The staff near the entrance rushed around. My knight seemed rather well-known here. *Hmm, so he does like to gamble? That's a hidden side to him.* I worried slightly, remembering my old caretaker's words. *He's not scum, right?*

"Let's gooo, Princess," he said, setting off.

"Wait, I'm coming!"

I hurried after him, and we passed through the thick doors into the building.

"Wow...what a place..." I breathed out slowly, looking at the lavish interior.

"Is this your first time in a casino?"

"It is."

I couldn't help but look around at everything. Crowds of people walked across the bright red carpet, all wearing expensive-looking clothes. Coins clattered out of slots—I could hear winners cheering from the gallery

alongside groans from losers. It was...a noisy place.

"Do you come here often, my knight?"

"Nah, this is the second time. And the first time I've come for fun."

"So you're a beginner too."

I'd almost convinced myself that he was a regular here, but apparently not. *So he's not scum. Phew.*

"How do we have fun here?" I asked excitedly. The atmosphere of the place might have been getting to me.

"Hm, I don't really know. Let's take a look around."

"Got it! Although...do you have money?" You couldn't play in a casino without any, right?

"Don't worry—I got some from the Grandsage!"

"R-Right."

Despite the cheery response...it wasn't *his* money. He already received a stipend from the princess of Roses since he was their State-Authorized Hero, and now he was getting money from the Grandsage in Highland. It almost seemed like he was collecting...sugar mommas. *And* he was gambling with the money...

Maybe he is *scum.*

Suddenly, he started tugging me along by my hand. "Come on, Princess."

"Hey!" I protested. "Why the hand?" I felt myself warming up from the heat coming through his skin.

His expression was as blank as usual. "There're a lot of people here. We don't want to get separated."

Guh...he's always so calm.

Despite the internal complaint, I returned the grip like it didn't bother me and followed him. We passed poker and blackjack tables, games of roulette and baccarat, slot machines...and all sorts of other things. This might have been my first time in a casino, but so far, it had been pretty fun. I didn't know the rules for these games, but it was enjoyable to watch others play.

Every so often, we watched some of the show that was taking place on the big stage in the middle of the casino. Women dressed in flamboyant clothes were dancing, and occasionally, people would do other types of performances. The customers cheered and jeered—if they liked what they

saw, they'd toss money in the form of chips onto the stage. I sat down at a table a little ways away from the show to take a break. My knight had gone up to a bunny girl serving drinks.

"What's that cocktail?" he asked her.

"This is a gimlet."

"Are they good?"

"They are. They have a very refreshing flavor, so many people enjoy them."

"I'll take two." A moment later, he headed back with two glasses. "Here you go."

"Thanks..."

Oh, so he *could* be thoughtful. We toasted and I put the glass to my lips. It certainly was refreshing. *Not bad, my knight.*

"Whoa! That's strong!" he exclaimed, sputtering a bit and puckering his face.

You'd look so much cooler if you didn't make that expression, I thought.

"Well, whatever." Suddenly, he downed the entire drink.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "Aren't you a lightweight?"

"Don't worry about it. I didn't win anything gambling, so it'll cheer me up."

"Ah...right..."

We had indeed lost money at essentially everything we'd tried. I'm sure we'd made poor bets. We had started out with small amounts, but as soon as we'd gotten the hang of it, we had started betting more and more. We'd lost. All of our chips had vanished.

Makoto Takatsuki had apparently never used money for betting, so he'd quickly given up and called the pastime "not for him." I also hadn't gambled much in Laphroaig—I felt lost when I thought about how much money was shifting in this place.

"So you never used the money you got from your believers to play around?" he asked.

"Of course I didn't!" How could he say that?! Was *that* what he thought of me?! *Maybe it's why he brought me here.*

"What now?" he asked. "Shall we head somewhere else?"

That suggestion at least made sense—he had no skill at gambling.

"Hmm, well—"

“Brother! You came!”

I let out a yelp as a youthful beastman suddenly slung an arm around my knight’s shoulder. However young he might’ve been, he was well-groomed and wearing high-class clothes.

“Oh, and who is this? Hmm... Oh! The princess.”

“I-Indeed...and you are?” He was acting awfully familiar with me, but it was oddly inoffensive.

“Ah, my bad. I’m Peter Castor. My family runs the place. Please enjoy yourselves!”

“R-Right...thank you,” I replied vaguely, making sure not to say anything about my status as a cursed priestess.

“And thanks for the help with the ‘disturbance’ a while back!” he continued. “There’re a lot of beastmen in the family, so we really appreciate it. I’ll give thanks on behalf of my father and brothers too.” The man bowed deeply.

Oh. Apparently, he knows about me... He doesn’t seem concerned about it though.

“We didn’t do anything extreme,” I replied. “And half of our success was due to my knight.”

The “disturbance” had actually been a planned rebellion of beastmen and demihumans. It’d been a false uprising though, brought about by a curse the Snake Sect had placed on a drug they’d distributed called weed. I’d channeled my curse removal magic into rain, dousing the rebellion, breaking the spell, and avoiding a large-scale catastrophe.

“It definitely was extreme...to our family at least.” This Peter Castor looked awfully sincere. “The two of you can ask for whatever you like today.”

“Hmm, well, it seems that neither of us are good gamblers,” my knight said, relaying our string of losses.

“Then I’ll show you around our best establishments! No charge, of course!”

“We couldn’t poss—”

The man insistently interrupted. “It’s our thanks for saving the city. Come on, Brother, let me do this!”

“Well, if you’re going that far... You okay with that, Princess?”

“I have no complaints.” The casino had been fun, but the noise was

starting to get to me.

Peter of the Castor family showed us around the city. Apparently, an introduction from the mafia could unlock a lot of doors...

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"Honestly, you drank far too much."

"Thanks, Princess."

Peter had taken us to all kinds of fancy places, and now I was staggering along...with Furiae's help. He'd escorted us around, recommending this place and that, so getting the timing right to slip away had been pretty difficult. Incidentally, a lot of the establishments had been staffed with beautiful women to "entertain" the patrons—as soon as we'd walked in, there'd been women coming up and pouring me drinks.

But—

"Oh, you want to ignore me and get close to my knight?"

—Furiae had threatened everyone, resulting in all the women quickly scattering.

I suppose that's what happens when you're accompanied by the most beautiful mortal alive—even the gorgeous hostesses shy away from her. Peter had just given reluctant grins. Still, I would've been exhausted if I'd had to keep up a conversation with women I didn't know, so I was pretty grateful for the result of Furiae's demeanor. We'd gone to a fair few places, and this pattern had repeated at each one. By the end of the night, I was pretty drunk.

"We're here."

"Thanks...Princess," I managed.

She'd brought me back to my room. I'd told her that I would be fine as soon as we got back to the inn, but she'd insisted on helping me all the way up to my room. She sure was kind.

"Ugh, I feel awful. What'll I do for training today..." I wondered.

"You..." She trailed off in disbelief. "You think you're going to do some training after this?"

I fell down on the bed. Furiae stared at me like I was insane.

Ah, so soft... I wanted to sleep, but I hadn't practiced much today. *Two hours should do it...*

“Do you want me to cast a spell to sober you up?” she asked.

“Huh? You can do that?” I hadn’t known she could use healing magic. But since she was offering...

“Go on, Princess.”

“Look this way.”

“Mm,” I grunted, rolling to look up. Furiae’s beautiful face appeared above me, staring down. We held each other’s gaze for a while before, slowly, her face drew closer to mine.

Uh, hang on?

Her long hair brushed against my face, and her perfect features were so close to me. Before I could react or say anything, her lips lightly brushed against my forehead.

“Wha?”

“The *Curse of Slumber*. Sleep already,” she murmured, smiling down at me.

My eyelids were rapidly growing heavier... She’d lied about the sobering magic.

“N’fair...Pr...incess...”

“Rest well, my knight.”

Those words were the last thing I heard before I fell asleep.

◇

When I awoke in an empty space—my goddess’s space—I was panicking a bit.

“The princess...kissed me?”

What’d brought that on all of a sudden? It had just been my forehead... That was normal in America, right? (At least, according to the internet.) But I wasn’t American.

Hmm...

“You’re thinking stupid things, Makoto.”

“Oh, Noah!”

I hurriedly knelt and offered a greeting. *Come on! I need to distract myself.* Calm Mind... Calm Mind...

“Going for another girl, Mako?”

“That’s not—” I turned to Eir to protest, but then I noticed the small girl

behind her. She was rather adorable but looked somewhat unhappy.

"Adorable? Of course I am, Makoto Takatsuki."

She'd read my mind. She was inhumanly cute. She had gorgeous pink hair.

That was Ira, all right.

She was a patron goddess of Cameron, which was known as the land of business. Believing in the Goddess of Fate was a somewhat surprising notion for a country of realist merchants, but Cameron had plenty of faithful believers. Though, I'd also heard that their faith took a slightly weird form... *Let's just ignore that for now.*

I looked her over. It'd only been a few days since we'd last met... Maybe she just had some free time?

"I have no such thing!"

"Sorry." Whoops, I'd pissed her off. The small goddess was now glaring at me.

"You *are* a strange one...for being able to keep your sanity while viewing a goddess directly."

I just stared at her quizzically. Eir had once said the same thing. As a goddess, she was inhumanly beautiful, and there was an otherworldly echo to her voice.

"I told you, that's my disciple, so of course he can!"

"He surprised you too, didn't he?" Eir asked Ira. "He's a real weirdo."

Ira could never measure up to Eir's seemingly endless affection or Noah's allure that could tempt anything.

The small goddess must have read my mind again because she frowned slightly. "Don't call me inferior to Noah."

"Calm down, Irrie! It's just preference," Eir said.

"Hmph."

Yep... She still seemed unhappy.

"What a cutie!" Noah giggled, ruffling Ira's hair.

"Ack, Noah?!"

My goddess's mood was as good as Ira's was sour. Despite this being a dream, I could smell a sweet scent.

Anyway, why was Ira here?

"It's nothing important. I was just talking with Eir about the next phase of the Northern Front Plan."

“The second phase...already?” We’d only just defeated Zagan a few days ago. She sure was rushing.

“I’m with Mako,” Eir said. “We should rest more.”

“No, we should keep up the momentum and target Astaroth! If we can accomplish that before Iblis returns, we’ve all but won!” Ira clenched her fist tightly.

“Are you suuure?” Noah drawled, propping her chin on her hand. “You’ll mess it up right away.”

“Not this time! It’s a foolproof strategy utilizing my *Future Sight*!”

“Uh-huh...” Noah looked unconvinced. “You’re just going to rely on Makoto, right?”

“I don’t need your disciple! The heroes and priestesses of the six goddesses will be enough!”

“Hey, Mako,” Eir said. “If she messes up, do you mind helping? Ira will probably do *anything* you ask her to. Actually, you’re the reason we defeated Zagan, so why not ask for something now?”

“Eir?!”

Both Noah and Eir had shown little faith in Ira’s abilities—she deflated, seeming like the wind had been knocked out of her sails. The expression on her face was funny, but I was more interested in the “anything” Eir had mentioned.

“So does that mean you can free Noah if I ask?” I mean, Eir had said *anything*.

Ira’s face twisted into a grimace. “No! Of course not!”

“Aww.”

Guess she couldn’t. But why? I glanced at Eir and Noah. Eir wore an awkward smile, and Noah was just shrugging.

“Mako, Noah’s here as a punishment handed down by the Sacred Deities. Think of it like a prison. Defeating a demon lord hasn’t given you enough sway to request her freedom.”

“That makes me sound bad,” Noah protested. “You act like I’m some criminal.”

“*Like* a criminal?” Eir gave her a knowing look. “You got up to all sorts of things in the divine realm...”

“Eh, what’s the problem? All I did was swipe a relic from the Godking’s vault.”

“Of course that’s a problem! Papa’s relics can destroy *planets*!”

Noah and Eir had launched into an argument.

The Godking’s relics...destroying planets... There were all sorts of things to worry about in that exchange. *Man, the goddesses’ conversations really are on another level.* Either way, my request wasn’t going to happen.

After squabbling for a while, Eir turned back to me. “There’s only one way to free her, Mako. One of her believers has to get to the Seafloor Temple and meet her directly.”

“So that’s the only way...” Well, that *was* what Noah had told me.

“It’s not like I’d complain if Ira *could* free me,” Noah said with a rueful chuckle.

I guess that would be too good to be true. *I’ll just have to clear the dungeon myself.*

“Mako, is there anything else you’d like to ask for?”

Well...hmm...

“How about reclassifying Noah? Change her title. Instead of one of the wicked deities, could she be known as an eighth Sacred Deity?”

“I-I can’t do that!” Ira cried. “Althena would never allow it!”

That idea was no good either? I looked at the other two goddesses—both of them stared back, and their eyes told me to pick something else.

“I-Is there anything else?” Ira asked.

Hmm, what would help Noah...?

“Well, you could...make it so Noah can have more than just me as a disciple.” Ira should be able to do that at least.

But her expression was bleak. A long silence ensued.

“I-I can’t.”

Wait? Really? What *can* you do?!

Ira was gritting her teeth and looking down, obviously frustrated. The feeling was mutual. I just wanted to do something for my goddess...

“Uh, Mako,” Eir began. “Everything you’ve said so far touches on the divine agreements that have stood since the end of the war.”

Noah picked up the explanation. “Only the Godking—or Althena acting in his place—can overturn them. I’m grateful you’d try and help me, but Ira’s the youngest, so she can’t possibly go against them.”

“I see... Then I suppose there’s nothing I’d like to ask for,” I decided, convinced by their explanations.

But Ira had turned toward me, and she was now glaring. Rejecting her offer must have hurt her pride.

"I'm the goddess of Cameron, so I could give you loads of money for—Um, well, I guess the princess and the Grandsage are taking care of money for you. I could offer you women...though with your title, they are already throwing themselves at you. Maybe a legendary weapon or some armor... What?! You can't even use them?!"

Her whole speech was impressive—she didn't even wait for my answers because she could read the future and see how I'd respond.

"I can't use a weapon bigger than a dagger," I admitted.

My expression must have looked pretty pathetic. Even Lucy's staff was too heavy for me... I *was* training though.

Ira slumped over. "I-I don't have anything to give..."

Noah and Eir were watching with grins. *Yeah, they aren't going to help. Hmm, what could I ask for? Something relatively minor...*

"How about a skill or something?" She must be able to offer one I could use.

"Huh?"

"Ira, I used *Gift* to give him *Elemental Magic*," explained Noah.

"Ugh...*Gift* would..." She didn't look entirely happy.

"Ira?" I asked.

"I mentioned before, Mako, but that can only be used on your believers," Eir told me. "You'd have to convert to Ira's faith."

Convert...

"I won't do that. And even if I did, it would be to you," I said, glancing at Eir, "rather than Ira." Eir had promised me *Water Magic (Saint Rank)* if I ever converted—that'd be great. Still, this was all purely hypothetical anyway since I wasn't going to abandon Noah.

Eir giggled, then said in a singsong voice, "You'll always be welcome!"

"I thought you'd given up on trying to poach him," Noah grumbled, glaring at her.

"The match is still on as long as I don't."

"Just call it off!"

The two of them got along really well. Also...were they paraphrasing manga from my old world? How'd they know about it...? *I guess 'cause they're goddesses.*

Suddenly, Eir clapped her hands together. “What about this? You temporarily convert to Irrie, she uses *Gift*, and then you go back to Noah. That way, you’ll retain the skill.”

“Th-That’s it! Thank you, Eir! Let’s do it!” Ira cheered. “Noah?”

“Mmm, I’m fine with it as long as he comes back.”

Should I be using loopholes like that? I’d learned in the Water Temple that doing this kind of thing was shameful and would see you punished... But, if the goddesses themselves were suggesting it, it shouldn’t be a problem.

“Now! Temporarily become my disciple and I can use *Gift*! *Fate Magic* is the strongest! You can even use *Teleport* or time spells if you train enough!”

Ira had apparently gotten her confidence back—she was grinning. Well...people who could use *Fate Magic* were certainly rare and strong. That skill would be a lot of help for future adventuring.

I turned the idea over in my mind. But, ultimately...my answer was obvious from the beginning.

“Ira... Thank you, but I’ll pass.”

“Uh...” She seemed stunned into silence for a long moment. “What?!”

“Mako, why?”

“You should take what you can, Makoto.”

All of them were confused. *Come on, you three... I thought you could read my mind.*

“Temporarily converting and coming back? Can you really call that following your faith?”

The truth was plain to see—I was all-in for Noah.

The three goddesses went silent at my words. It looked like they all understood.

Eir sighed. “Noah...you always get the zealots.”

“He’s such a cutie, isn’t he? C’mere.” Noah smiled, pulling me close and running her hand over my head.

Goddess, that tickles.

“Guh... Then there’s nothing I can do...” Ira really seemed depressed. “Ugh! Forget it! If you think of something, come and see Estelle.”

With those parting words, Ira vanished.

“Aww, she’s sulking,” said Eir.

Noah smiled. “She’s always been short-tempered.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have done that...” I muttered. Ira might’ve been a bit sharp, but she’d offered a gift out of the kindness of her heart. If I thought of something, I’d go see her. “She can see the future, though, can’t she? Surely, she would’ve already known what I’d ask for.”

“Mmm, she probably can’t see *your* future,” Noah said. “That’s why she came to ask you.”

Huh. Wonder why.

“We just saw *exactly* why,” Eir pointed out. “You’re a crazed zealot for Miss Wicked Deity here. As much as the Snake Sect are of their own...”

“Hey! Don’t call me that!”

“Ow, don’t hit me.”

As soon as the comment passed Eir’s lips, Noah started smacking her over and over.

That made sense—I’d heard that it was harder to see someone’s fate if they’d placed strong faith in another type of deity.

“Actually, zealotry is what screwed Ira over,” Eir said thoughtfully. “The Snake Sect came up with the demons’ battle plan, and their faith in Typhon is absurd. Demons in general don’t have that strong faith, so Ira hadn’t thought it would be an issue. The Snake Sect is a real problem.”

Noah nodded. “But she’s correcting the mistake now, right? She said she had an idea earlier.”

“She did?” I asked. *I’d like nothing more than for someone to deal with the Snake Sect.* They really were irritating.

“More importantly, Mako, think of something to ask her for. She *is* really grateful to you.”

“That’s right. She’s usually such a brat,” Noah added, giggling. “I’ve got *days’* worth of material to tease her with now.”

Eir shook her head. “Come on, Noah. She might put on a strong front, but you know how she is.”

Eir was right—Ira had seemed to put on a show of being tough, but in reality...she seemed pretty weak to people blaming her.

Suddenly, my vision started to blur. My time was up.

“Bye then, Noah, Eir.”

Noah slipped in close as I said goodbye.

“Makoto,” she said seriously, putting a hand on my cheek.

“Y-Yeah?”

“You really have done well. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you,” I replied after a pause. Her words had come out sounding rather emotional.

She spoke again, her beautiful face mere inches from mine. “But...don’t push yourself *too* hard.” Her murmur in my ear was the last thing I heard before I lost consciousness.

◇

When I woke up, I was in my bed.

“Don’t push myself too hard?” I muttered.

Lucy and Sasa had said the same thing recently. *Maybe I should ask the two of them to just hang out sometime...*

I tried to push myself up, but something was in the way.

“Mm?” Lucy mumbled in her sleep.

Whaaaat?!

I tried to scoot back, but there was something soft on my other side as well.

“S-Sasa?!”

I was sandwiched between the two of them as they breathed softly. *How did this happen? What went on last night?*

Then I remembered...Furiae cursing me to sleep...

As I considered that, I heard heavy footsteps rushing up to the door.

“My esteemed Tackie!” Fujiyan exclaimed, bursting into the room. “Big news! The—” There was a long pause as he took in the scene. “Ah, my apologies. Enjoy yourselves.” He quickly turned around and shut the door softly.

“Hey! Wait!” I called after him.

My raised voice seemed to rouse my bedmates.

“Mmm, that was a nice rest. I always sleep well next to Makoto,” Lucy remarked.

“Takatsuki’s bed is the best,” Sasa agreed.

“Guys, you know this is *my* room, right?” Why were they using it without my permission?

The two of them excused themselves to wash up. They’d be back soon

enough. In the meantime, I'd hear what Fujiyan had to say.

I strode out of my room, catching up with my friend.

"So, Fujiyan, what's this big news?"

"Indeed!" he responded, turning serious. "The Snake Sect has been destroyed!"

What...?

Chapter 2 — Makoto Takatsuki Is Shocked

"The Snake Sect has been destroyed!"

This must have been the "idea" that Ira mentioned earlier... But, how?

"Fujiyan, what exactly—"

"I am personally unaware of the details... All I know is that under Lady Estelle and His Holiness's orders, the State-Authorized Hero of Highland—Sir Alexander—traveled to the demon continent alone, attacked the Snake Sect hideout, and killed the archbishops who were sheltering within."

"H-Huh." As far as I was concerned, that was plenty detailed. *Seriously, how large is Fujiyan's information network anyway?* "Still, Alexander did all that on his own? The last time I saw him, he seemed completely spaced out. Were none of the Soleil Knights or Temple Knights involved?"

"Well... It certainly seems like it was an independent action rather than a military one."

Hmm. Highland's hero must be ridiculously strong. Wouldn't it have been easier to defeat Zagan with his help? He'd been acting independently of Sakurai so far, and I wasn't sure why.

"Regardless, he killed every leader of the Snake Sect," Fujiyan continued. "Their heads are currently on display in the courtyard in front of the castle. Archbishop Isaac is among them..."

"He is?"

I was aghast.

This was a terrorist who had set blight monsters loose in Horn, caused a stampede in Symphonia, tried to bring a demon lord back to life in Springrogue, and planned a comet strike on Great Keith. In addition to all this, he'd apparently been proposing strategies to the demon army as they attacked Cameron.

That was Archbishop Isaac.

Oh...so he's dead... And his head's even on display... I'd never actually

seen him alive, considering how everything had turned out. I wonder what he looked like...

"Will you be going to view them?" Fujiyan asked obliquely.

I shook my head. "Nah...I'll pass." It was too late now. Trying to punish the dead just didn't sit right with me. It was strange—the atmosphere was oddly heavy despite the fact that we'd just lost a serious enemy.

"Oh, but I do have another piece of news to share!" Fujiyan boomed, trying to shake the lingering gloominess away. "Princess Noelle has safely broken through the Saint's Trial! She has become the Saint of Affection!"

"The Saint's Trial?" I asked, tilting my head.

Just then, Princess Sophia arrived. Having overheard us talking, she began to explain. "Indeed, Hero Makoto. Lady Noelle—as the Priestess of the Sun—overcame the trial and has gained the same power as Saint Anna once held."

Oh...I think I remember. Someone had mentioned something along those lines a while ago. Huh. So Princess Noelle was a saint now. That likely meant that she was stronger...but could a saint fight in a battle?

"My esteemed Tackie, Saint Anna's *Ballad of Victory* was a legendary skill. I've heard that it can increase the power of thousands upon thousands of soldiers at once, making each one dozens of times stronger."

Oh, a buff skill. Strengthening tens of thousands of people at once was just ridiculous though. Normal buffs could only affect a few people at a time—maybe as many as a dozen. *Ballad of Victory* must have been a skill unique to the Saint of Affection.

"And Princess Noelle can use that now?" I asked.

"Indeed. She has received the skill as a result of beating the trial."

"Well, that's good to hear." It would have been even better if we'd had it in the last fight...but being able to use it against Iblis was still a stroke of good luck.

"Incidentally, did you have need of us, Princess Sophia?" Fujiyan asked. He was probably reading her mind and steering the conversation along.

"I do, yes. Lord Fujiwara, I apologize, but I will need to borrow Hero Makoto and take him to Princess Noelle."

"Of course!" Fujiyan replied. "Think nothing of it."

Uh? So do I not get any input? I suppose it was an order from my superior, so I couldn't exactly object.

Ultimately, the two of us headed for Highland Castle.

"So those are...?" My words came out half question, half mumble.

Many people were gathering in front of the castle, and there could only be one reason: they were all here to see the heads of the Snake Sect's leaders, mounted and on display. Some in the crowd were even throwing stones.

I couldn't *exactly* call it in bad taste. The Snake Sect was an organization that extolled the liberation of cambions. This in and of itself wasn't a bad thing, but their methods were flawed, just indiscriminate terrorism. They often targeted Highland and Cameron since faith in the Sacred Deities was strongest in those two nations, and each scheme dragged innocent civilians into the line of fire. Many people even lost their families. Thus, some might find satisfaction in seeing their hated enemies in such a disgraced position.

The gathered crowd was talking, and I used *Listen* to catch snippets of the conversation.

"Don't shy away! Do you know how many times they've ruined our business?!"

"Right! I have nothing but gratitude for His Holiness and our hero!"

"How many have died because of the Snake Sect?"

"Our pope is kind and merciful. They should have just eradicated all cambions while they were at it."

"You've got that right. If you let their filthy blood survive, they'll sprout back up in Laphroaig."

"Laphroaig should be burned to the ground!"

"They killed my dad!"

"Just wipe the cambions out!"

I couldn't put what I was feeling into words. The Snake Sect was made up of cambions...but not every cambion believed in the Daemons. I thought about the orphaned cambion children living in the church in the slums and about the nun who cared for them. Despite being cambions, all of them were peaceful citizens who believed in Althena.

The general public seemed to view all cambions as evil, though. Cornet was Furiae's hometown, and her people were merely eking out a life beneath the ruins. Would there ever come a day when they could live in

peace?

Maybe I can talk to Ira about that.

While I pondered things, Princess Sophia and I headed through the gate.

"I apologize, Hero Makoto. I made an appointment, but..."

"Her secretary double-booked the slot—it's not your fault," I told her.

When we'd arrived, Princess Noelle hadn't been present. Princess Sophia had demanded to know what was going on, but she'd simply been dismissed. "Lady Noelle is extremely busy. Make another appointment."

It was their mistake...and yet they were being completely unreasonable about it. *So this is the difference between the crown princess of a massive nation and the princess of a small country...*

With no other choice, Princess Sophia made a new appointment, but it wasn't for another few days.

We trudged back to the infirmary.

"Oh, welcome back, Sir Makoto, Sophia."

"What?" the two of us asked in unison.

When we stepped back into my room, I realized that Princess Noelle was present.

What the hell?! I mean, I kinda thought there were a lot more Temple Knights around than usual. They must be her guards.

Furiae sat in a chair nearby, unhappily petting the black cat on her lap. "My knight, it seems that she came to see you and Princess Sophia."

I also spied Lucy and Sasa nearby. They seemed somewhat nervous about sharing the space with Highland's crown princess.

"What's going on?!" Sophia asked, hurriedly running over.

Right, I suppose I should say something. "Congratulations on your trial, Princess Noelle."

"Thank you, Sir Makoto," she replied. "Sophia, I apologize for my secretary. There was a change of plans, so I came here."

"I... It is an honor."

Oh, so Princess Noelle had purposefully prioritized us. I could see why Princess Sophia seemed so overwhelmed. The local princess *should* be massively busy, so what was she doing here?

I stared at her quizzically, but she just grinned and strode over.

"Sir Makoto."

“Y-Yes?” What was she about to say?

“I hear you have become the Grandsage’s guardian knight. It seems that the castle has been talking of little else but you since the fight against the demon lord.”

“It...has?” Well, that was somewhat unsettling. Then again, the Grandsage was pretty high-ranking. *I guess I kinda brought that on myself.*

“Ryousuke has been talking about you constantly as well. Please, work to defeat Iblis alongside him.”

She gripped her hands together and peered up at me. Light seemed to be radiating from her. *I-Is it because she’s a saint now?*

Suddenly I felt the icy daggers of Lucy, Sasa, and Princess Sophia’s glares stabbing into my back. But since this *was* Princess Noelle, it seemed like they were holding back.

“I will keep it in mind,” I answered ambivalently.

“Don’t think—do!” She leaned in even more.

You’re kinda close! I tried to back away a little.

“Would you stop fawning over my knight?” Furiae asked, yanking Princess Noelle backward.

“Oh, my apologies.”

“Hmph.”

Princess Noelle moved away, not even sparing a glance at Furiae.

“Highland already has many excellent heroes and warriors,” Furiae snapped. “My knight is weak, so kindly refrain from dragging him into this.”

Princess Noelle carried on despite the objection. “Highland will, of course, stand directly against the demon lords’ armies. However, we will need all of our strength. Additionally, I am a ‘saint’ now.”

Furiae scoffed. “Hmph, and you feel the need to boast about it?”

“Hardly. I would appreciate you not implying as much.”

Those two weren’t meeting each other’s eyes. They both *sounded* calm, but... The chill in the air was rather unpleasant. Seeming to realize the tense atmosphere, Princess Noelle changed the topic. She looked up at me, beaming. “Sir Makoto! I have a message.”

“For me?” I asked.

“Ryousuke has something he would like to discuss with you. Please arrange to meet with him.”

Huh? I couldn't help but be taken aback by her words. *Sakurai has come by the infirmary quite a lot. In fact, he was here pretty recently...* He'd chatted with me and had conversations with Furiae and Sasa. But he hadn't brought up needing to speak with me. Did he want to talk *alone*?

"Ah, I had noticed that the Hero of Light wasn't with you," Princess Sophia commented.

Princess Noelle's smile seemed a bit lonely. "Indeed. He is rather busy, so I have been unable to see him much of late."

Oh, so that was how things were? The two were passing by one another like ships in the night. *Does that mean I shouldn't mention Sakurai sneaking in here?*

I glanced over at Sasa and saw her staring back at me meaningfully. Yeah, message received. I could read the room *that* much at least!

Furiae, on the other hand...did not hold back. "Oh? But Ryousuke occasionally visits us here. Isn't that right, my knight?"

"Guh."

Come on, Furiae! Why would you say that?! Oh, there goes the princess's smile.

Furiae offered an exaggerated look of chagrin.

Hey! You did that on purpose, didn't you?

"Furiae..." Princess Noelle murmured after a moment. "Is that true?"

"I didn't say anything. Just forget about it."

"I haven't seen him in a week!"

"Oh, that sounds awful," Furiae said. "You have my sympathies."

"Why is he seeing *you*?!"

"Hey! Don't grab me like that! It hurts."

"Ryousuke! What's so good about this woman?!"

Yup, Princess Noelle's lost it.

Furiae merely replied, "Ask him that."

A long silence trailed in the wake of her words.

"I can't," Princess Noelle finally admitted.

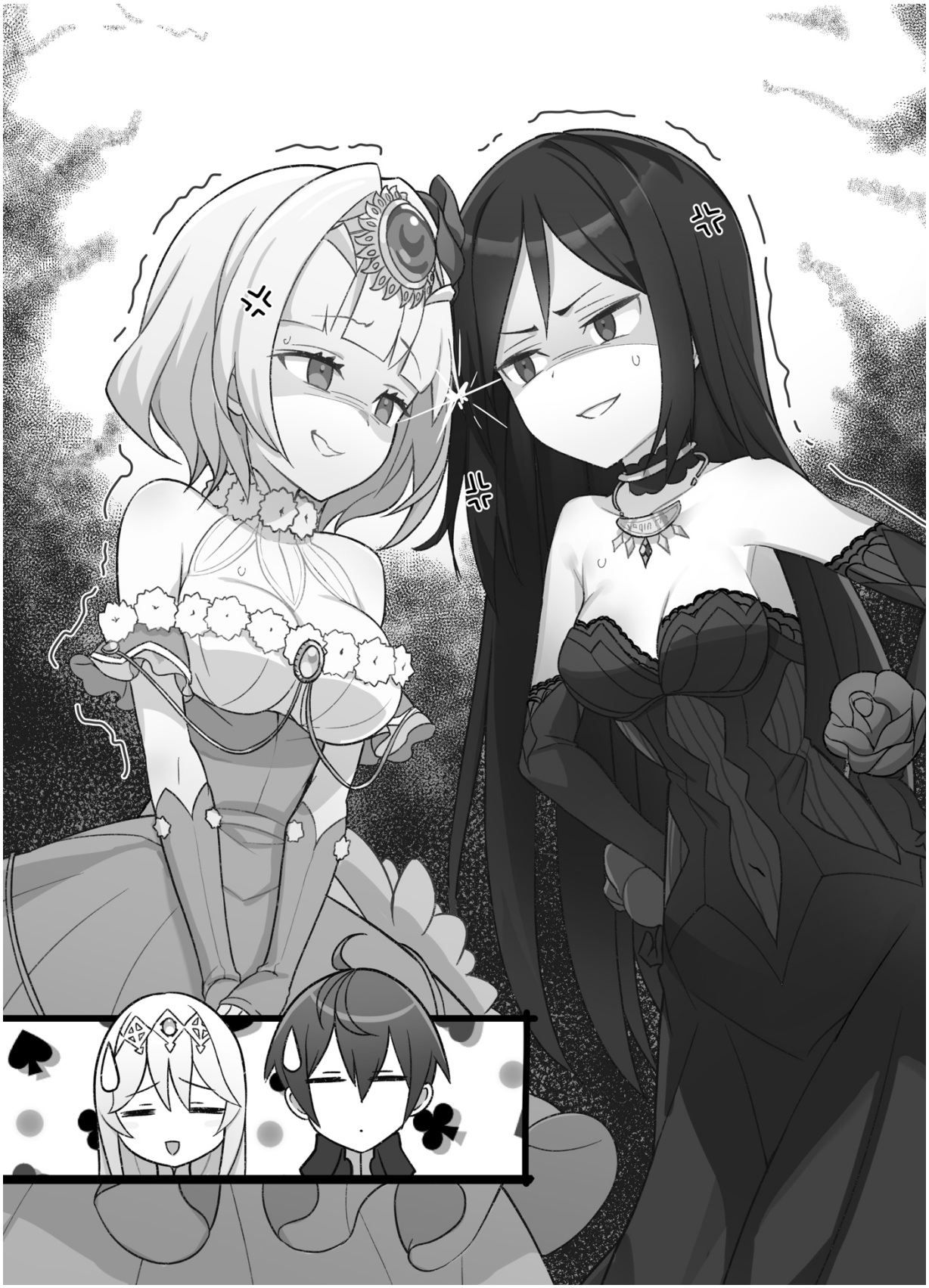
Furiae's eyes flashed. "Hah! I suppose feigning innocence sure is tough."

"I don't want to hear that from a wanton charmer like you."

"What was that?"

"Oh, is there a problem?"

The argument had escalated, and now, the two of them were up in each other's faces, glaring.



This couldn't go on.

"All right, Princess, stop," I said, turning to Furiae.

Princess Sophia spoke in a soothing voice. "Calm down, Lady Noelle."

We then pulled them apart. *Those two are like cats and dogs!* I could understand why they might squabble when Sakurai was present, but even when he wasn't around, the pair still fought. They were like this *all* the time.

"My apologies, Sophia. Please, Sir Makoto, meet with Ryousuke," Princess Noelle said with a soft smile.

"O-Okay," I stammered, nodding along.

Princess Noelle then bid us farewell and left. I used *Listen*, and as she departed, I heard her giggle. Under her breath, she whispered, "We'll be having a real *talk* tonight, Ryousuke."

Ack, she was going yandere. *Sorry, Sakurai.* I mentally prayed for him.

Princess Sophia rushed off after her, perhaps wanting to converse as they walked. Getting time with busy individuals really was tough.

And so, the usual peace returned to the room.

Next up...

Since the princess had asked me, I figured I should get it sorted out quickly. I hustled over to Fujiyan.

"Fujiyan, Fujiyan."

"Oh, what is it?"

"I wanna ask you something." I lowered my voice to a murmur. "Can you arrange someplace where I can talk to Sakurai privately?" It wouldn't be easy to get some of his time since he was so central to the war effort. But I figured Fujiyan should be able to help with that.

Unfortunately, he seemed to think it would take him a fair while, even if he utilized his *Mind Reading* skill to optimize things. "Lady Yokoyama deals with his schedule. If you wish to meet with him, well...you should be prioritized if you simply ask."

Ah, I remember—Saki Yokoyama is his second-in-command, right? Here, it was all about who you knew. And, true to that, I had an appointment by the very next day.

I waited for Sakurai in a reserved space in one of the bars in the business district. The place was busy and noisy, but the customers weren't a bad sort. I wouldn't have to worry about getting caught up in anything weird.

As I waited for him, I picked at my fries and sausage. What did he want to talk to me about?

Considering how diligent he was, did he want to discuss the next step of the Northern Front Plan? We'd just defeated a demon lord, so as long as we prepared ourselves, I figured we should be fine.

Suddenly, I was pulled from my thoughts.

"Did I keep you waiting, Takatsuki?" My old friend looked rather glum.

"I just got here," I replied. Our exchange was practically the cliché couple's conversation...

After greetings, we made our way to a mostly private bar. I got a second ale while Sakurai had fruit juice, and we ordered a fair bit of food as well. We toasted our drinks and just chatted for a while. *He looks tired... Or am I just seeing things?* He soon gave a little laugh and explained that apparently, his defeat of Zagan had improved morale among the Soleil Knights, but as a result, training had gotten a lot more exhausting.

After a bit more catching up, Sakurai brought up the reason for our meeting. "By the way, I wanted your advice."

"What's up?" I asked. His expression had grown serious.

"In that fight against Zagan...I thought I was done for."

I paused. "Yeah, it was a pretty sticky spot."

So he wanted to talk about *that*? I mean, it was already over and done with. As long as he'd learned something useful that would help him survive the next time, what was the problem?

Ira's more engaged now as well.

Those thoughts swirled through my head as I sipped at my ale.

"Takatsuki," he said, "there's a significant chance I could lose my life fighting against Iblis. If that happens, will you defeat him with the other heroes?"

I stared at him, silent and questioning. That sure was a bizarre request.

But his words only grew more forceful as he leaned forward. "You can react calmly against anything, so even Iblis—"

"Hold on, Sakurai," I interrupted, noticing something that was off. "There was a *Fate Magic* prediction that the Hero of Light would be killed by Iblis, right?"

"Y-Yeah... That's why I want you to—"

"And we can't do anything about it after the fact?"

“Wha?” Sakurai’s mouth dropped open at my question.

He hadn’t even thought about it.

“This world has skills that can resurrect people even after they’ve died. There are probably items that can do the same thing.”

“There...are?”

“I’ve met someone with a skill like that, so I’m sure of it.” Well, I knew of Sasa—her *Action Game Player* skill had the subskill *Extra Lives*.

Sakurai still looked somewhat hesitant. “But...something like that would be a national treasure, or some divine—”

“What’s the problem there? Treasure or relic, mankind is doomed if you lose.”

“I suppose... Surely Noelle would know about something like that if we had it?”

“Hmm... Probably.” Considering how head over heels she was for him, she would’ve likely realized the possibility already. I had another idea, though—Ira. Surely, she’d have some idea. I mean, she was a goddess! She *should* know.

“I’ll ask an acquaintance of mine.”

“Sure... Thanks, Takatsuki. Sorry, I’ve been a mess lately.”

“Sakurai...” I hadn’t been imagining his exhaustion earlier. How could I get his spirits back up? Damn my introversion and how much I struggle with wording this kinda stuff! “For two heroes, you and Princess Noelle seem a bit depressed.”

Suddenly, out of nowhere, two girls called out to us.

“Yoo hoo! Takatsuki, Ryousuke!”

I briefly thought we were getting hit on, but at a second glance, they were both people we knew.

“Oh? Princess and Yokoyama?”

“Saki, Furiae, what’s up?”

Furiae was wearing her usual dress, but Yokoyama wasn’t in the armor I’d seen her in before. Instead, she was wearing a blouse and skirt.

“It’s sad to see two men drinking on their own. We came to keep you company.”

“I’m taking this one.” Furiae sat next to me while Yokoyama took the seat next to Sakurai. At least *these* two seemed to get along... Princess Noelle and Furiae certainly didn’t.

“What’s up?” I asked Furiae quietly.

“I met her while wandering around town. Then, when I heard you had come to meet Ryousuke, I decided to tag along. Problem?”

“Not really.” My one concern...was how angry Princess Noelle had been yesterday. Well, we’d be fine if she didn’t find out about this meeting.

“Are you two done talking?” Yokoyama pouted. “Ryousuke’s so busy that we rarely have time to hang out, even if we do work together.”

Yeah, she was definitely the most beautiful in our class...and her confidence made her even cuter.

“Why are you falling for someone else’s girl?” Furiae demanded, pinching my cheek.

I shook my head. “I wasn’t.”

“The two of you seem pretty close...” Yokoyama remarked, her tone questioning.

“D-Do we?!” Furiae’s tone, on the other hand, seemed a bit panicked. “Not particularly!”

Sakurai smiled. “Furiae, you seem to be in good spirits.”

“And you certainly don’t.”

Sakurai’s smile turned somewhat rueful.

“He’s been down since the fight against Zagan,” I explained.

Furiae eyed him for a moment, then huffed. “Hmph, I’ll listen. Out with it. Oh! But I want some wine first!”

“I’ll go for a sangria, I think,” Yokoyama said. “This place has so many delicious drinks. The food’s good too.”

“So, swordfighter, is their fish pie good?”

“It is! I’d recommend their vegetable terrine and the prawn fritters!”

The two of them were excitedly poring over the menu together. Suddenly, the atmosphere seemed much brighter. Having the girls with us really brought the mood up! Sakurai seemed to be happier as well.

“Oh, right,” Yokoyama said, facing me. “I mentioned this to Furiae as well, but the pope has been shifty lately. You follow a wicked deity, right? Watch out for him and the Temple Knights.”

“I need to...watch out for them?” I asked.

Sakurai looked equally confused. “What’s happened, Saki?”

“He’s on good terms with you, so you probably haven’t noticed, but the pope is extremely critical of other faiths,” Yokoyama explained.

“I know...” Furiae added. “The oppression of Laphroaig got much worse after he took power.” She was mournfully chewing at her nails. Well...the pope was pretty much a natural enemy of Furiae and me.

“Apparently, his predecessor died in one of the Snake Sect’s terrorist attacks. Since then, he’s been obsessed with revenge...”

“Well, didn’t he just get revenge?” I asked. Highland’s State-Authorized Hero had destroyed the Snake Sect’s hideout. Surely the pope was satisfied by that.

“Well...” Yokoyama paused for a moment. “He’s been talking about ‘pulling out the root’ to prevent a second Snake Sect from forming. Cambions and followers of other gods are becoming targets now.”

“That’s just Takatsuki and Furiae, isn’t it?” asked Sakurai.

Furiae groaned. “He’s such a pain...”

“So,” I interjected, “he’s got a list of *potential* criminals?” The pope was even worse than I’d thought.

“Yeah...but I’ve got good news as well,” Yokoyama said with a smile. “You’re the Grandsage’s guardian knight now, right? Not even the pope will mess with her, so you’re actually safe.”

“Oh yeah! Did you see this coming?” Sakurai asked.

“W-Well, you know how it is.” They thought that me becoming the Grandsage’s guardian knight was some kind of plan I’d devised, but I really hadn’t thought that deeply about it. “Well, forget about me...” I turned to Furiae. “I’m worried about Princess here.”

“Hmph. I’ll be fine. The church already hated me.”

“Still, you should be careful. Maybe you shouldn’t wander the town alone like you did today,” Yokoyama warned.

I nodded. “That’s good advice.” Yokoyama really was nice.

After that, we spent a while just eating and chatting, particularly about the fight against Zagan.

“Sakurai’s sword was crazy...” I murmured.

“In training, I was never able to borrow power from such a high-level angel,” he told us.

“See, Takatsuki, he’s way better when he’s around you,” Yokoyama said.

“He is?”

“I am!” Sakurai insisted. “You should join our squad!”

“Uh, I heard the Soleil Knights have the toughest training on the

continent.” *I like training on my own, but in a group...*

“I’ll be with you!” Sakurai said, grabbing my hand tightly.

“Ow! Sakurai...”

“Are you drunk, Ryousuke?”

“Oh? Are you two *together*?”

“What the hell?”

Spirits were high enough that we could just mess with each other like that.

“I think he’s cheered up,” Yokoyama remarked with a sudden laugh. “Takatsuki, I’m glad you came to see him.”

“You support Ryousuke in public and private alike,” Furiae said to her with a sigh. “As his fiancée, shouldn’t you be able to take it easier? You don’t need to force yourself onto the battlefield.”

She was right—the burden on Yokoyama must be pretty heavy.

“Well...yeah. But I’m the only one who can fight with him.”

“Don’t the rest of our classmates have strong skills?” I asked. I remembered a whole bunch from the Water Temple.

“Even if they do, that doesn’t mean they can use them.” Sakurai’s expression was conflicted. “Veterans are stronger, and not many people will willingly fight against the demon lords.”

“Hmm, so that’s why...” And here I was, doing my best with *Water Magic (Low Rank)*. My other classmates didn’t know how good they had it! Oh well. The elemental magic Noah gave me is strong, so it’s fine!

Furiae spoke up, a grin spreading across her lips as she sipped her wine. “Still, isn’t your biggest duty as his fiancée to have his children? Are you being rash?”

Sakurai looked awkward. I didn’t blame him.

“Hmm...kids. I’m still a teenager, so being a mom is...” Yokoyama trailed off. “Also, I’m Ryousuke’s second-in-command, so I get to spend the most time with him. I see more of him than even Princess Noelle.”

“Hmm.” *I guess working alongside your lover has its perks.*

“Although...we’ve used protection...but we *are* properly together. Right, Ryousuke?”

“Uh...yeah.”

Are you drunk, Yokoyama?! We didn’t need to hear that much detail!

“R-Right...I see.” Furiae had turned red, even though she’d been the one

to bring it up.

Yokoyama, probably noticing the awkward mood, forcefully changed the subject. “Wh-What about you and Aya, Takatsuki?! She made a big announcement about becoming your wife! Are you already married?!”

“Well...sooner or later we will be.”

“Are you taking care of her? She said she wanted four kids, so you’ll need to work hard too!”

Why are we back on this topic?!

“Uh, yeah... I will.”

“You’re going to marry Princess Sophia as well, right? And there’s that cute elf. Do you and Aya get any time on your own?”

She was full-on blitzing me with questions.

“U-Uhmm, sometimes?”

Sorry, I’m always training...so not really.

“Hmmm, something smells fishy,” Yokoyama said, peering into my eyes. “When was the last time you two did it? Answer me!”

Ack, she’s wasted!

Sakurai tried to cover for me. “Saki, you’re bothering him, so—”

“You shut up! Now tell me!”

“Urgh.” I was in a bind. If I just answered without thinking, she’d find out soon. She and Sasa were friends after all.

I’d just have to be honest and—

“He’s still a virgin,” Furiae interjected with an exasperated sigh.

The other two yelled out in shock.

“Takatsuki...aren’t you traveling with Aya?” Yokoyama asked.

“I know how it sounds coming from me,” Sakurai said, “but you should probably be with her a bit more.”

Ugh... I felt so embarrassed. Why did my classmates have to find out about this? While I was thinking about how to respond, Furiae spoke up.

“He trains until two in the morning and gets up before anyone else. He hasn’t got the time to look after any lovers.”

Everyone stared silently at me.

“I mean, what’s the problem?” I asked. “My skills are weak, so I need to train.”

“You should take some time off.”

“A moment’s carelessness can mean the difference between life and

death!" I protested.

"I have no idea what you're talking about..." Yokoyama mumbled.

Neither did I, to be honest.

Sakurai cocked his head. "Do you...always live like that?"

"Yeah... How long have you been training so hard?" Yokoyama added.

"Well, since the day we got here."

Again, silence.

"Ryousuke, your friend's a weirdo."

"Well, he's strong... No one else trains like that."

Furiae scoffed. "Don't give him too big a head or he'll float away."

They were all being so rude. *Also, Furiae...he probably wasn't complimenting me...*

Eventually, our party came to a close. I hoped Sakurai's mind was a bit lighter now.

"I drank too much..." Furiae murmured. She leaned against me as we headed back to the inn.

"It's the other way 'round this time," I remarked.

I then realized that we were a wicked deity's believer and a cambion walking around a town that viewed those things unfavorably... *Just in case, I should have* Scout *running.* I was pretty sure the Temple Knights weren't just going to attack us out of nowhere, but I couldn't be positive.

"Say...my knight?"

"Hm? What's up?"

"I...used to have some feelings for Ryousuke."

"Okay." It was only after I answered that I noticed the "used to." So...she didn't like him anymore?

"I'd never left Laphroaig, so I didn't know how the world worked. I was in Highland, a place full of enemies, and I made a mistake—I fell for the only person who was kind to me. I thought he might feel like that about me too."

"Well, he's a natural lady-killer..."

I think he is *fond of her.* Still, he had like twenty fiancées, so it wasn't like he could return the feelings of everyone who fell for him.

"Lately, though, my eyes have been opened. Ever since I met you."

"Huh. Well, that's good." Traveling over the last few months had really

seemed to do her good. “Hopefully you’ll be able to meet someone nice.”

There was a pause.

“Are you...doing that on purpose?” she asked.

“Doing what?”

“Quit it with that dumb look! You’re pissing me off...” She turned to me, and through a haze of drunkenness, stared intensely. “My knight, who’s the most important to you? The Princess of Roses? The mage? The Hero of Great Keith? Or...someone else?”

“The most important?” *Hmm, probably the first person I became an acquaintance with in this world.* “I guess...Noah?” She’d been the first one to have faith in me.

“Isn’t that your goddess? Well, you can’t get with her, so that’s better than I thought.”

“Get with?”

“It was nothing. We’re there. I’m heading to bed. Good night.”

At that, she headed straight into her room with steady steps.

The next day, I was training in my room when I heard thundering footsteps. *That definitely sounds like Fujiyan.* I felt like the same thing had happened not too long ago.

“My esteemed Tackie!”

“Brother!”

Surprisingly, Peter Castor was next to him.

“Come with us!” Fujiyan urged.

“It’s huge, Brother! Come on, right away!”

“Wh-What?!” I sputtered.

“Just move!” they called in unison, yanking me along outside. It looked like we were heading for the military training grounds behind the castle.

“Fujiyan, Peter, what is it?”

“The goddess Ira has descended!” Fujiyan exclaimed.

“Ira?” I parroted. She’d been here the whole time though, possessing Estelle. *Wait, only Noah and Eir know that...*

“Yeah!” Peter cried. “She never comes to other countries, but she urgently showed herself here to cheer up the citizens of Highland!”

“And we could not bear to leave you out!” Fujiyan added.

“You’re an impressive one, Fujiwara,” said Peter. “Tickets are already going for a fortune at the Premier!”

“It did indeed cost a pretty penny for the three tickets!”

“Brother, this’ll be the best day ever!”

“Uh, okay?”

I couldn’t keep up with them. Though now that I thought about it, both Fujiyan and Peter were followers of Ira since she was the Goddess of Fortune. Either way, I trailed along behind them until we reached our destination.

Normally only those affiliated with the military were allowed inside the training grounds, but currently, they were packed. I figured they were all Ira’s believers...but the whole vibe was just odd.

“Ira=★=LOVE!”

“Ira=★=Life!”

“I’d die for Ira!”

These, among other slogans, were written on a bunch of jackets and hand fans—many in the crowd seemed to be wearing this merch. The people who were running the event (the organizers?) were calling out across the crowd with amplification magic.

“Okay! Everyone line up properly!”

“No cutting ahead! Ira hates those who don’t follow the rules.”

“Merchandise is limited to three items per customer! No scalping!”

Uh... What the...?

“Come now, come now. This way,” Fujiyan said, guiding us to our seats.

“I’ve never been in the VIP section before, Fujiwara!” Peter exclaimed.

Fujiyan guffawed. “Likewise, in fact!”

They were practically dancing with excitement. Just what was going on here? Eventually, the training grounds were completely overcrowded, and...the atmosphere grew almost feverish.

Then, the show began. The surrounding area darkened.

An attack?! I thought for an instant. But it seemed as if a barrier had actually blocked out the light. Suddenly, a spotlight illuminated the stage. It was...*Sun Magic: Light*...or something like it. A cute girl was standing in the halo of light. Hang on...Estelle? Her airy, sparkling dress was different from her usual garb, so I hadn’t realized for a moment.

What exactly is going on here?

Then, Estelle opened her mouth and spoke.

“Hiiii☆! It’s everyone’s idol, Iraaaa! Thank you all so much for coming

today! Let's all have lots of fuuuun!"

Wh-What...?

For a moment, I couldn't even comprehend what was going on.

"Ahhhh!"

"Iraaaa!"

"Look this way!!!"

A roar rattled the arena as the audience started cheering, jumping up and down, and shaking the ground. I looked sideways—Fujiyan and Peter were yelling as well.

"Tackie! It's our goddess! She's right in front of us!"

"Wow! She's actually here in the flesh... I'm so glad to be alive! Right, Brother?!"

"Y-Yeah..."

I'd met Ira pretty casually, but I guess that wasn't really normal... Estelle—hosting Ira—was now singing and dancing on the stage. It was weird, but it all seemed almost familiar. I felt like, somehow, this was something I'd seen a lot of.

"Are you all having fuuuun?!" she called out with a wink.

A wall of noise answered her. She had a perfect smile, was acting cute, and no matter how much she bounced around, her miniskirt didn't show her underwear.

Oh... It's just like Noah, I realized.

Rude! my goddess mentally retorted. *I'm way cuter!*

So she was listening.

Well, Irrie's always focusing on you, Noah, said Eir.

Is she? I thought back.

Yep! She's not happy that Noah's considered the most beautiful goddess in the divine realm.

I heard Noah give a smug hum. *Well, that's not changing anytime soon!*

Huh...

Estelle on the stage was letting her clothes flutter around as she sang some weird song. "This might be a bit much..." I muttered to myself, earning a fierce glare from my side.

"My dearest Tackie? I assume you were not intending to speak ill of Lady Ira, were you? You would never bad-mouth our perfect Goddess of Fortune, whom I have relied on since my apprentice days, while I had no

time even to sleep...would you?!”

“Brother...even you should have some awareness of what you can and can’t say... Ira is my strongest foundation. I was never good at fighting, despite being in the mafia, and since I’m a beastman, I’m dumb. I’m sure you wouldn’t be speaking badly of the perfect goddess who supported me even as I was compared to my brothers...right?!”

Their words were both coming so fast.

“S-Seeing such a perfect goddess is the best,” I blurted out.

“Right!” they chorused.

Scary. So that was what a zealot was like... I cheered along with the crowd so they didn’t realize that I wasn’t a “fan” as well. Eventually, the concert ended in thunderous applause.

Watching the concert together had put Fujiyan and Peter on the exact same wavelength. The pair wandered off to go drinking. *With the way things are going, it won’t be long before Fujiyan is a “Brother” as well.* They invited me too—I went along to the first bar, but when they suggested that we hop to another place, I begged off. I just couldn’t keep up with the two of them.

On my walk back, I peered up at the sky. It wasn’t even evening yet. *What to do now?* My only real idea was to visit the estate that Estelle had in Highland, the one I’d only visited once before. I decided to ask about Sakurai’s future.

Despite my plan, though, there were a lot of guards around the district. It didn’t look like they’d just let me wander in. Also...Estelle had just finished a concert. She was probably pretty tired.

I guess this isn’t the time for it.

Just as I went to turn around and head back, I heard someone call out to me. “Oh, if it isn’t Hero Makoto of Roses.”

“Janet?” I turned to see the armored captain of the Pegasus Knights.

“I thought you were in the— Well, I suppose it wasn’t necessary to begin with.”

Janet giggled. She had actually come to visit me on several occasions. Although every time, she’d sighed and left because I’d been training.

“So, what are you doing here after not only not accepting my proposal but becoming the Grandsage’s guardian knight?”

That sure was a pointed question...

“Uhm, well I’ve come to visit Estelle.”

“Hmm? Have you got an appointment?”

“No...”

“What? None at all?”

“So I *would* need one, huh?”

“Of course.” She sighed deeply.

Whoops. Apparently, I’d overlooked the way things were supposed to work. “Lady Estelle was just a host to her goddess. For the time being, she will not be—”

But suddenly, a loud voice interrupted her. “Is that the Hero of Roses, Sir Makoto Takatsuki?!”

Huh?

“Yes, that’s me,” I answered, raising my hand.

“Lady Estelle wishes to see you! Please head to her estate!”

Janet and I exchanged silent looks.

“You didn’t make an appointment, did you?” she asked.

“Nope, I just turned up.”

“And got summoned...”

“Looks like it.”

“This way!” called the butler-looking guy, ushering me along. “You can bring your companion!”

“Shall we head off?” I asked.

“W-We?!”

“Well, I’d be kinda nervous on my own...”

“Ugh. Well, I suppose I’ll have to.”

I realized how unfair it was for me to rope her in like that, but she agreed anyway.

We were both guided to a reception room. Inside—wearing a completely different dress than earlier, something more elegant—was Estelle. Guards were lined up around her as well.

“Welcome, Hero of Roses. To you as well, Daughter of the Ballantines.”

“Pardon our sudden visit,” Janet said.

“Hi, Ir— Lady Estelle.” I’d quickly stopped myself from saying “Ira” under Estelle’s sharp glare.

Estelle ordered the guards to leave and the three of us were left alone.

“So,” she began. “I would hear your business.”

“How’d you know we would be here?” I asked.

“I...” she paused for a moment, befuddled. “Who do you think you’re talking to?”

Oh, duh. Estelle was the priestess of Ira, who could see the future. Of course she knew we were coming. *Still, Ira, you predicted the future wrong during the battle...*

“Forget what happened in the fight against Zagan!” Ira (as Estelle) snapped.

“Sure.”

“Um...” Janet interjected. “I’m not quite sure what you’re talking about.”

Well, Ira had answered my thoughts rather than what I’d said aloud, so the gap in conversation would sound pretty weird. *Well, whatever. Let’s just distract Janet by carrying on.*

I cleared my throat. “I’m actually here about the Hero of Light...Sakurai.”

“Ah, I see,” said Ira.

Come on! If you keep reading my mind and answering, this conversation’s going to get even weirder!

At my side, Janet was looking quizzical.

“Is there an item that could prevent his death after Iblis’s resurrection? Or let him survive even if it looks like he’ll die?”

“There is not.”

“I...see.” *I suppose an item to resurrect the dead would be way too convenient.*

“There is, however, a spell. The Priestess—pardon, the Saint of Affection—Noelle can use *Revival*. All we can do is have her at the Hero of Light’s side during the battle,” Ira explained.

“That’s all...?” It was what Furiae had suggested. Apparently, even Ira didn’t have a perfect solution. *Ah, maaaan...*

“Wicked Deity follower, you go too far.”

Whoops, shouldn’t have thought that. “My apologies.”

“Um...Lady Estelle, Makoto didn’t say...”

Ack, Janet was really confused now. Estelle (or Ira) seemed to think the same thing—she sighed, then snapped her fingers. The air seemed to thicken oddly in the room.

“Janet?” I asked.

She’d fallen silent and wasn’t even blinking. Huh?

“This is an isolation barrier,” explained Ira. “She was getting bothersome, so I created a place where we could speak privately.” She said it so simply, but I was pretty sure that an isolation barrier was saint rank... “Now then, you’ve been all too happy to run your mouth, Disciple of Noah.”

Her tone had changed. She approached me, glaring. *Ack, she’s pissed. I have to say something!*

“Y-Your concert was great!”

That stopped her dead. “You...were there?”

“Yes, with friends.”

“Hmph... So, what did you think?” The anger in her eyes was fading.

“Y-Your dancing and singing were the best! Both of them started crying!” Fujiyan and Peter actually had done that, so I wasn’t lying!

“My...how honest. I like that.” Her eyes gleamed an ominous gold as she put her hand on my cheek.

Hang on... Wasn’t that *Charm Eyes*?!

Hold it right there! No stealing my Makoto!

“Tch, I suppose a saint rank barrier isn’t enough to hide from Noah.”

Irrie, I saw him first.

“Eir is there too...?” Both of the goddesses had butted in to the conversation, and everything was getting way more hectic. “Okay, back on topic. About Sakurai dying... Isn’t there any way we can avoid that?”

“As of now...no. I had thought Zagan’s defeat might change the future, but it hasn’t. We will just have to deal with it when Iblis returns. Noelle needs to remain at his side constantly so she can cast *Revival* when needed.”

Right... “Even though she has that spell, she can’t be part of the war, can she?”

“Fighting Iblis will be different,” Estelle stated. “Against him alone, we will be unable to win if we do not fight with all we have. All of the priestesses will be participating.”

“What?! Even Princess Sophia?” Would she be okay...?

Right, even her! Eir exclaimed. *So you make sure you protect her!*

“G-Got it.”

Though, when was Iblis going to return? Everyone kept going on and on about how he would be back soon, but so far, it just hadn't happened.

"In the next ten days," Ira said casually.

"Huh? Oh...that's soon..." *Finally, huh?* I wondered what kind of person he was.

"The demons' future strategies cannot continue as they were," Ira interjected awkwardly. "After all, we have crushed the Snake Sect."

Oh yeah. The Snake Sect's zealotry toward Typhon had skewed the accuracy of Ira's visions. So...did that mean we'd be okay next time?

"I apologize for not living up to your expectations," she sniped, folding her arms. "Was there anything else you wanted?"

Anything else... Yes! Something really important!

"You know Furiae...I mean, the Priestess of the Moon?" I asked.

"Hm? Ah... You want to do something about the discrimination against her and the cambions?"

Well, that was quick. Ira looked conflicted though.

"Is that...not something you can do?"

"Hmm, well... The moon priestess a thousand years ago made things awful, so, maybe..."

The Priestess of the Moon back then was known as the Witch of Calamity. She'd been a traitor to humanity who'd defected to Iblis. Surely that had nothing to do with Furiae though, right?

Irrie, maybe you should let bygones be bygones?

Woo, thank you, Eir!

You should! Noah added. *You can add me to that, right? I want loads of believers.*

"*You're* out of the question," Ira and Eir retorted in unison.

Yeah, that figured.

"Naya's priestess—the Witch of Calamity—rampaged of her own accord, so it doesn't have anything to do with the current priestess. However, Noah, your believers were doing *exactly* what you told them! They killed our heroes!"

"The situation's different now," I tried.

"But you'd do *anything* she asked, wouldn't you?"

"Well, pretty much," I admitted.

"Then no! I will not be wiping Noah's slate clean," said Ira. "Naya lets

her believers just live their lives, but Noah...pretends to do that and then gives exact guidance. She's much more dangerous. That's why she can't have any extra followers."

Aw. Oh well. I'd thought that, with additional believers, we might've contributed more.

"Incidentally, if she could have more believers, who would you want to convert?" Ira asked me, though she probably already knew.

"Well, Lucy, Sasa...maybe Fujiyan."

"Rosalie's daughter, Great Keith's State-Authorized Hero, and the biggest merchant in Roses... That is a dangerous combination."

Well... Yeah. Let's leave it.

Eir?!

Meanies, griped Noah.

Eir spoke again. *Though, we* should *do something about the moon priestess and the cambions. They should be treated equally now.*

"Really?!" I exclaimed. Yes!

"Althena will need to make the final decision though," Ira said.

Mako, Irrie and I will both talk to her at some point.

"Thank you!"

Phew, that should help both Furiae and the cambions in Laphroaig... I hope.

Ira stared at me through Estelle's eyes. "So, is that everything?"

"Yes..." I didn't think there was anything else... Oh, wait, there was. "You seem different from normal when you're in front of people."

"Gah!" she cried out. "What does it matter?!"

Huh. That reaction was way more than I'd expected.

Irrie's always put on a bit too much of a front.

Noah chuckled. *Yeah, it's super cringe, so she should stop it.*

"It's fine!" Ira protested. "Eir, leave it be! Also, Noah, I don't want to hear that from *you*!"

Well, I'm a calmer goddess, aren't I?

Was Noah actually more relaxed? Honestly, I'd gotten the impression that Ira was more serious.

Eir then piped up. *Hey, Mako, take a look at your Soul Book.*

"My Soul Book?"

Irrie's the one who wrote the descriptions for your skills.

“Huh?” I quickly pulled it out and flipped through to the skill pages.

Water Magic (Low Rank): A skill that lets its user cast beginner water magic. Your low MP means your spell’s low rank, but them’s the breaks! Good luck training!

“This... *Ira* wrote it?”

“I did. Got a problem? It says so right there.”

Oh, it did... Her name was written in small text next to the skill... Huh, so most people did know her like that. In person, she had a more ladylike demeanor.

“That’s enough already! I’m dropping the barrier.” Ira huffed, arms folded, and looked away.

“All right. Thanks for everything,” I said, kneeling.

With a muttered admonishment that I should always be that respectful, Estelle snapped her fingers.

“H-Huh? What the...?” Janet blinked dazedly.

“We’re done talking,” I told her. “Let’s head back.”

“Uh? You are? When did you—?”

I pulled Janet along by her hand. *Guess I shouldn’t have brought her.*

“Bye, Estelle,” I called over my shoulder. “Give my regards to Ira. Thank you.” I’d thanked her already, but doing so again was fine.

“I don’t know what will happen with the moon priestess. Still...you can rely on me if you need anything.”

I nodded. “Excuse us.”

“Come again.” She waved as we departed.

“Um. Makoto Takatsuki, you seem rather...close with her,” Janet remarked.

“I do? We’ve always been like that.”

“I didn’t realize it before, but... The Grandsage, Lady Noelle, General Talisker, Lady Rosalie... You are oddly skilled at getting the influential on your side.”

Was she praising me?

She then shot me a glare. “Though it seems you only consider me as a useful contact.”

Ack, she was mad now. “L-Let’s go eat!” I exclaimed, trying to pull her away from that topic.

“Hmph... I suppose so.”

“I know a good place! This way.” Well, I said that, but it was just somewhere that Fujiyan operated. I could always count on him! Oh, but he was off drinking with Peter right now... Well, whatever! They *did* have good food.

“Welcome, Mister Takatsuki’h. Thank you for your— Is that Lady Janet Ballantine’h?!” Nina’s shock had her ears standing on end.

Oops. Almost forgot that Janet was from a pretty impressive family. *Maybe I should have called ahead.*

“Do not worry about me,” Janet said.

“R-Right’h... If you’ll pardon our humble establishment’h... Please, enjoy yourself’h.”

After her short greeting, Nina sidled up to me. “Mister Takatsuki’h! Why are you always with royals and nobles’h?! You don’t even make reservations’h!”

“Sorry... By the way, how come you’re working here every time I visit? Surely you don’t have to?” After all, Nina was a noble too, and Fujiyan’s wife, so surely she didn’t *need* to be here.

“I prefer keeping myself busy than playing at being a noble’h... On another note, you’re never here with the same woman’h... But I won’t tell Miss Sasaki or Miss Lucy’h.”

She gave me an exasperated wink. *Uh, it’s not like that...*

“What’s wrong?” Janet asked.

“Nothing at all’h!”

Nina and I hurriedly turned back to Janet. We ordered some light drinks and some of the specials. This place was a commoner-style food establishment in the noble district, and Janet was peering around in avid interest.

“This is a very unusual place for the third district,” she remarked.

“Right? My friend runs it.”

“So you’re a regular? I’ll remember that.” She smiled. It seemed like her good mood had returned...for now at least. I suppose this made up for dragging her along to Estelle’s estate.

“What kind of places do you usually eat at?” I asked.

“I often dine with my knights. Eating at home is rather stuffy, so I haven’t as of late... My parents are constantly badgering me about marriage.” The latter half of her statement was quiet enough that I wasn’t *entirely* sure what she’d said.

“Huh? I didn’t catch the end of that.”

“It doesn’t matter!”

I sighed. Afterward, we spent a while just chatting with each other.

“Hey, got any seats?” I heard from the door.

“Welcome, feel free to sit where you like!” answered a waitress.

The newcomer was wearing gleaming golden armor and had similarly colored hair. *A flashy knight, huh...* I looked at his slightly drunken face and he stared back at me with sharp eyes.

Hm?

“Oi, Hero of Roses, why are you with my sister?”

“B-Brother?!”

“Guh.”

This was the Hero of Lightning—Gerald, the leader of the North Cardinal Knights.

“Explain yourself,” he demanded.

Damn, another scary one.

“Gerr-bear, what’s up?” A familiar exotic beauty peered out from around him. This was Sól’s hero, Olga.

What an odd combination.

“L-Lady Olga, you’re here together?” Janet asked calmly, albeit clearly shaken.

“Oh? You’re with a guyyy? I can’t let you out of my sight, can I?! Ooooh la la!”

“L-Lady Olga! Are you drunk?”

“Not yet, but I will be!”

Was Olga always like this?

“Oi! Are you listening to me, Hero of Roses?!”

“Ah, yeah, yeah, I’m listening.” *Whoops, zoned out for a second.*

“I’m joining you, got it?” Gerald demanded.

“G-Go ahead.” It didn’t sound like he’d take no for an answer, so I might as well take the chance to get closer to the other two heroes.

Although, both of them were pretty...*yikes*...and had beaten me up before.

Suddenly, the conversation was interrupted.

"Would you go elsewhere?" Janet asked her brother coldly.

"Wha?! Janet?" Gerald seemed taken aback.

"Come on, Gerr-bear, don't get in your sister's way. Later, Janet, Hero of Roses."

"O-Oi," Gerald protested as Olga dragged him away.

Huh? Guess we wouldn't be eating together.

"Sorry about him," Janet said.

"You don't mind sending him away like that?"

"I don't!"

"Okay... By the way, he and Olga seemed pretty close."

"They fought alongside each other in the battle against the demons. Since then, they've been spending time together."

"Huh..."

"Lately, Lady Olga has been sneaking into his room..." she finished awkwardly.

"Sneaking?"

"Um, so, she's there until morning, and..." Janet wore a glare, practically insisting that I try and understand what she was implying.

Oh! They're spending the night together? Wait, whaaat?! Gerald and Olga?! Huh, that was a surprise...

I glanced in their direction. If I had to say, it looked like Olga was taking the lead. Gerry might have looked irritated, but he still seemed like he was enjoying the conversation. I guess they were pretty alike—both enjoyed picking fights.

Crap, Gerald was glaring back at me. I glanced away hurriedly.

"Forget about him," Janet said. "You're with me now." She took my hand as she spoke... Her eyes were a bit sharper than usual. Scary.

"Janet, are you drunk?" I asked.

She giggled. "I haven't had that much," she insisted, resting her head on my shoulder.

Yeah, that's what drunk people do.

Hmm... I was scared of looking at Gerald, so I used *RPG Player* to do it without actually moving. Olga was offering him a drink. He wasn't looking this way though. *Phew, all good.*

“You have your head in the clouds,” Janet remarked.

I paused for a moment. “That’s not true,” I protested.

“Look at me,” she said, hands shifting to my cheeks to pull my gaze to her. She still had her head on my shoulder, so I could feel her breath tickling my face. Her glossy golden hair brushed against my skin as her eyes peered up at me through her long eyelashes.

“Do you have free time today?” she whispered into my ear.

“Well, a bit,” I answered after a moment.

“Then spend it with me.”

I’d pulled her along to see Estelle, so I couldn’t rightly say no to that request.

“Okay.”

She giggled. “It’s a promise.”

I was slightly uneasy at the tone of her voice, but the pink in my cheeks was just from the alcohol, okay? She was just moving when—

“What are you doing?” demanded a voice with all the warmth of the arctic tundra.

It came from the side opposite Janet. Someone sat in that seat, right next to me. Who was it? Before I could check, they started tugging my arm and pulling me closer.

Finally, I managed to turn and see who it was.

“S-Sophia?”

“I was looking for you, Hero Makoto,” she said with an icy smile, her grip tight on my arm.

I thought she was alone, but then I saw several guards standing at the entrance.

“Wh-Why are you here?” I asked.

“You were late coming back, so I came to find you. Come, let us go.”

No, I was asking why she was *here* specifically, at Fujiyan’s restaurant. *Oh, looks like Nina just hid farther inside. Guess she was the informant. Well, she said she wouldn’t tell Lucy or Sasa, but she didn’t say a word about Princess Sophia...* She was Fujiyan’s wife, and he was a noble of Roses, so she would have to answer her husband’s superior if asked.

The princess and Janet were currently glaring at each other. I was caught in the middle.

“Oh, Sophia. Makoto and I are having a meal currently—perhaps

another time?”

“My betrothed has been caught up by some strange woman. How bad for you. Let us go, Hero Makoto.”

“You know men run from controlling women, right?”

“Would you kindly refrain from making passes at my fiancé?”

“Oh, but he said he would spend the night with me.”

“Wha?!” Princess Sophia suddenly glared at me fiercely.

Hey, Janet! I said I’d spend time with you today*, but not until* morning.

“L-Let’s all eat together!” I tried desperately.

I was employed by Roses, and I was Princess Sophia’s fiancé, so I knew I should listen to what she said...but I *had* promised Janet I’d stay with her, and didn’t want to break that promise while the words were still hanging in the air.

Princess Sophia sighed. “If we must...”

“I suppose so...”

I’d assumed they’d be angry, but they’d both just agreed. *G-Great! Let’s get them some good food.*

“N-Nina!” I called.

“Yessir’h!” she replied, bounding over. So she’d been watching us the whole time.

“Get Sophia a drink if you would!”

“I already have it’h!”

Nice service! I hadn’t even asked yet.

“Your usual, Lady Sophia’h!”

“Ah, thank you.”

Oh! Her *usual*! So Nina knew what Princess Sophia liked...wow.

“Mister Takatsuki, the food will be here soon’h!” she said before bouncing off. I...felt kinda bad. I’d have to apologize later.

“Come on, Makoto Takatsuki, empty your glass,” urged Janet.

Princess Sophia scoffed. “Hero Makoto, move over this way.”

“Isn’t that somewhat wanton behavior for a princess?”

“Likewise, Janet.”

“What?”

“What?”

“Guys, come on,” I tried. Was this going to go all right? Either way, our bizarre group began our night.

“And yet he doesn’t care in the slightest!”

“I feel sorry for you, Sophia. Come on, Makoto Takatsuki! You were part of the demon lord’s defeat—act like it.”

“I misjudged you, Janet. I apologize for saying you were past it...”

“You don’t need to *say* it. Father’s been too much lately as well...”

“Perhaps I can introduce you to someone?”

“And would they be stronger than Gerald?”

“Could you drop that, already?”

Before I knew it, Princess Sophia and Janet were getting along like a house on fire. I just kept sipping at my drink and picking at the snacks.

“Come on, up you get, Gerr-bear!”

Gerald had fallen over in his seat. Was he a lightweight? Great! I could challenge him to a drinking contest the next time he insisted on a fight! Olga soon picked him up and left the restaurant. At my side, the conversation had been looping and repeating topics.

Maybe we should head back as well?

“You must be getting tired. There is a carriage for you all outside.” That was Fujiyan, coming back from his night out with Peter.

There’s my mind reader! Thanks!

“I have said this repeatedly, but your ceremony is tomorrow,” Princess Sophia told me before she left. “Please do not forget to come to the castle.”

“I remember. I’ll be there,” I answered tipsily, nodding and waving as I watched the carriage leave. Her guards, including her geezer guardian knight, were flanking it.

“Sorry about making you guys wait out here,” I apologized. I’d invited the guards to join us, but they’d turned us down.

The geezer let out a loud guffaw. “Her Highness finds it difficult to let her hair down, but she has the most fun while she is with you!”

I waved again, and soon, the carriage pulled out of sight.

“Come on, Captain, let’s go.”

“Where’s my pegasus?” Janet asked. “I cannot see it.”

“You’re drunk! No drinking and riding!”

Some of her squad quickly pulled her into another carriage and then left. Huh. So drinking before you rode a pegasus was a no-go? This world had

some sensible laws.

After seeing them off, I headed back to my seat and stretched. “Aw, maaaan.” I sighed, slumping over.

“My esteemed Tackie—”

“—that’s our line’h!”

The voices behind me were reproachful. Fujiyan and Nina were glaring at me.

“I’m sorry for bringing big shots!” I apologized, throwing myself in front of them.

Afterward, Fujiyan had me test his new menu item—*niboshi ramen*.

“How is the taste?” he asked.

“Really strong...where’d you get the niboshi?”

“He made them’h...” Nina sighed.

Ah, another type of ramen dragging him toward the red. But it was really good. The fragrant taste of the fish stock paired with the chewy noodles was delicious. It was topped with char siu, bamboo shoots, fishcakes, and spring onion.

Yeah, this type of food is great, I thought, draining the broth.

By the time I got back to my room, it was long into the night.

◇ Aya Sasaki’s Perspective ◇

“My knight is late,” Fuu murmured from where she was reading her book.

“That’s the third time you’ve said so,” Lu commented. She was striking poses and practicing her magic in front of the mirror. It was different from how Takatsuki trained—he was usually still like a statue. Apparently, they did things really differently, even if they were both magic users.

“Sophie went to look for him, so I’m sure they’ll be back soon.” I was busy making preparations for tomorrow’s breakfast.

“He’s enjoying a night out on the town,” Lu sniped.

“He’s not you,” I retorted.

“What?! I wouldn’t...well, maybe I would.”

“You’re not getting away with that, Lu...” I warned her, sharpening the knife.

“Aya, don’t point that at me. I’m bored without Makoto here, so let’s

have a drink. C'mon, both of you!" At that, Lu pulled out a strong-looking bottle of liquor. She'd been pretty daring lately. I suppose...like her mom?

"Fine," I conceded. "I'll get some snacks." I was pretty sure we had some bacon, cheese, and crackers. I rustled through the cupboards.

"It's a girls' night! Let's drink the night away!"

"Lu, you know you'll get fat if you eat this much at night?" I asked.

"It'll be fine! I just need to throw around a few king rank spells to cancel it out!"

I was pretty sure that logic didn't work. Still, she *didn't* get fat, however much she ate. It wasn't fair. She twirled her staff around, and each movement made her chest bounce. Were they...bigger than before? I looked closer.

"What's up, Aya? You look kinda— Aaah!"

She yelped as I grabbed her chest and squeezed.

"They *have* gotten bigger," I declared.

"What are you doing?!"

"Whoa."

Suddenly, Lu pushed me back onto the bed, and her hand went inside my clothes.

"Hold on! Stop!" I yelled.

"I'll massage them bigger!" she insisted.

I yelped as we got into the usual flow of messing around.

"Mmm, My knight is late..." Fuu sighed longingly.

That was the fourth time tonight. Lu and I exchanged wordless glances before stopping. We then leaned in close to one other and started whispering.

"Fuuri's acting weird."

"She's in love."

"Ah... Damn it, Makoto."

"Well, there's not much we can do..."

"Okay, let's make her admit it!" Lu whispered before getting louder. "Come on, Fuuri, stop sighing and talk about Makoto."

"Let's chat, Fuu!"

She looked up, jolting, as we got closer to her. "Wh-What about?!"

We bombarded her with questions about him, but even after talking all night, she wouldn't admit her feelings.

“Mmh...” I mumbled, stretching as I woke up. I looked over at the next bed.

“She’s stripped again,” I mumbled, sighing. Lu’s pajamas were askew, and I gently fixed them.

The bed on the other side of Lu would be cradling a softly breathing Fuu...

Hang on?

“She’s not there...”

Fuu usually woke up really late, but she wasn’t in bed. Maybe she’d gone to the bathroom. Well, whatever.

“Mmmmh!” I stretched again before getting out of bed. It was still dark outside. I washed my face and checked my reflection, then opened the next door and found that Takatsuki had (probably) fallen asleep while training. He was snoozing while sitting completely upright.

“C’mon...” I lifted him, placing him in a bed and pulling a cover over his body. For a moment, I watched his dozing form. “Sleep well,” I said, kissing him on the forehead. I then left the room.

In the kitchen, I started getting breakfast together, which was my usual routine. Ham and eggs would work this morning. Bread or toast might be nice...but Takatsuki preferred Japanese breakfasts, so maybe rice? While I was thinking about that, I noticed a figure who would normally never be in the kitchen this early—a black-haired girl in a silky dress.

“Good morning, warrior,” she said sleepily.

“Morning, Fuu! You’re up early.” She definitely wasn’t a morning person.

“Can I help you prepare breakfast?” she asked.

“Sure! But how come?”

She shifted awkwardly. “I...wanted to make something for my knight.”

“R... Right...”

Her cheeks were red and she was hiding her mouth.

How cute... She’s definitely in love! She needs to admit it already!

Chapter 3 — Makoto Takatsuki Heads for the Award Ceremony

I woke up and got dressed, then offered my prayers to Noah. When I made my way into the living room, Sasa was awake, as she always was. Oddly, Furiae was sitting there too—she would normally still be sleeping at this time. Lucy was almost certainly still in bed.

"Morning, Sasa, Princess," I greeted as I sat down at the table.

"Hiya, Takatsuki."

"Good day, my knight."

As I sat down, I noticed a mysterious...thing...on my plate.

"Sasa, what's this black stuff?"

"Hmm... Charcoal that used to be bacon?"

"And the black thing next to it?"

"Charcoal that was once an egg."

I was silent for a moment. "Is there...anything else?"

"What?! Are you saying you can't eat what I made?!" Furiae demanded.

"What? *You* made it?!" I returned in shock. This was the first time I'd ever known her to cook.

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"N-Nothing." I stared at the black objects on my plate. Charcoal? It wasn't going to kill me, was it? I plucked up the nerve and reached out with my chopsticks, but then, Sasa yoinked my plate away.

"All riiiight, this is your actual breakfast. We just wanted to show how much effort Fuu put in." Sasa smiled, replacing the charcoal with a properly prepared meal. "I'm going to go wake up Lu," she said, wandering off.

I met Furiae's gaze, but she quickly and awkwardly looked away.

"It will be better next time," she mumbled after a moment.

"Ah... Okay."

This was really weird.

Lucy arrived after a while, still sleepy, and we all ate breakfast together.

I pulled my arms through my jacket's sleeves, fixed my dagger to my waist, and then shoved my money in my pocket. I was just deciding where I'd spend my day when Lucy called out and stopped me in my tracks.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Uh, I was just gonna wander around the town."

"Takatsuki," said Sasa. "Do you remember what day it is today?"

"Do we...have something planned?"

Huh. I don't think I promised to do anything with Lucy or Sasa... Did I?

"Haven't you heard?" Furiae asked, petting Twi in her lap. "Today is the award ceremony for those who distinguished themselves in the fight against the demon lord."

"Oh!" Right. That was *today*?

"That was close. You wouldn't have come back until the evening," Lucy remarked.

Sasa shook her head. "Sophie even reminded you. Jeez, Takatsuki."

Oh yeah, Princess Sophia had mentioned it when we got back yesterday. *Oh well. Guess I'll just spend the day here.*

I killed some time training, and Princess Sophia arrived at around lunchtime.

When she saw me, she sighed in relief. "Thank goodness you're actually here."

"Of course I am."

"Don't lie, Makoto," Lucy scolded. "You were about to go off this morning."

"He didn't remember at all," Sasa added.

Stop tattling on me, you two! Well, that cat was out of the bag. Princess Sophia gave me a half glare before saying, "We should be leaving now."

And so, we all walked with her toward Highland Castle.

"There're so many people..." I muttered, looking around.

The crowd was even denser than when Sakurai had been appointed—probably because people from all six nations were present. Lucy, Sasa, Furiae, and I were representing Roses. Though so many had already assembled, we were apparently still waiting on the king and the sacred nobility. *How lucky. They get to turn up fashionably late.*

I started juggling some waterballs to kill time, and I caught Furiae up in it. She challenged me to do something else, so we played around with all sorts of magic before Princess Sophia got angry and told me to wait quietly.

A group soon headed over to us, maybe having seen the disturbance. One of them seemed like a genial old man at a glance, but his eyes were sharp. He was wearing a priest's garb, but his attire was clearly of higher quality than the people around him.

This was the pope of Highland's church...with Temple Knights behind him.

"Excuse me, guests from Roses," he said.

"Your Holiness, what do you need of us?" Princess Sophia asked hastily. "If you had sent a message, we would've—"

The pope interrupted, waving her off. "I have business with the delegation from Roses, so it is only right that I come to you." He then turned to me. "Hero of Roses. You have my deepest gratitude for your aid in defeating the demon lord."

"R-Right..." I answered warily. *I thought he hated me for following a wicked deity...*

"I would like nothing more than to ask you to convert to Althena's church, but Princess Sophia is unlikely to allow that. However, is there a reason you have not converted to Eir? You are a hero of her country, after all."

"Your Holiness... Eir herself has allowed him to keep his own faith," Princess Sophia answered for me.

"It is not a matter of it being allowed or not. Our daily life is only possible thanks to the goddesses' blessings. We should repay them with our gratitude and devotion. Making a wicked deity's believer into a hero is heretical."

"W-Well..." she stammered, faltering at his sharp tone.

This again... I complained mentally.

Althena's followers are all so hardheaded, Noah added.

"Still, let us speak no more of it for now," said the pope. "After all, Sir Makoto Takatsuki is the second most decorated here today. There will be plenty of time to discuss such things in the future."

Huh. He'd let it go way easier than I thought he would. Princess Sophia's expression looked relieved as well.

But then he continued. “The real problem is the Priestess of the Moon.” The pope’s hostile gaze switched to Furiae.

She remained silent.

“Iblis will return in the coming days. And yet, the reincarnation of the Witch of Calamity, the very antithesis of loyalty, remains free. I swear it now! When Iblis returns, he will once again contact the moon priestess, and she will be a wolf among the sheep. She cannot be allowed to remain free.”

“Lady Noelle has said we should cooper—”

“Princess Noelle is another matter... Equal treatment of the beastmen and demihumans aside, lightening our stance on the filthy-blooded...”

Furiae’s expression was getting harsher as he spoke. This was bad.

“Princess helped with the rebellion here,” I interrupted before she could say anything. “She’s hardly going to defect *now*.”

“*Princess*...? Ah, you are her guardian knight, yes. Foolishness. Following a wicked deity was bad enough, but...”

This old-timer sure loved bad-mouthing my goddess...well, I suppose that, publicly, she *was* a wicked deity.

“However, I will concede that the moon priestess *has* contributed,” he admitted. “She will be kept in a guest room rather than a dungeon this time. That should solve the issue. Now, come with us.”

We all startled as the Temple Knights surrounded us. *Come the hell on! This is way too heavy-handed!* Lucy, Sasa, and I all stepped out to protect Furiae. The knights of Roses, despite their clear confusion, also moved to shield us. This had now turned into a confrontation between two countries’ knights. How was this going to go?

“My, what a shame. I hadn’t wanted to resort to force...” the pope said with a troubled look—albeit probably a fake one—as he folded his arms.

You’re already being plenty forceful...

“Hey, Grandpa Pope, want me to get her?”

Even as I wondered who had asked that flippant question, I saw that it was someone among the Temple Knights.

“You should not act out, Hero of the Sun,” the pope replied.

“This is all pointless. I could take ’em in a single hit.” Alec, the Hero of the Sun, was grinning as he spoke.

Was he...always like this? That’s not what I remembered.

“Stop this, Alec. Althena would not permit such barbarism. Well then,

people of Roses, if you change your mind, then come to the cathedral. We will be glad to supervise the Priestess of the Moon there. Once Iblis is defeated, she will be released. Until then." The pope turned on his heel and walked away.

"You got off lucky," Alec added before he and the other Temple Knights followed suit.

What was that...?

"Was he always so...?" asked Lucy.

Sasa shook her head. "He didn't say a word before, right?"

They seemed to be thinking the same thing I was. He'd changed way too much.

"Tch." Furiae scowled.

"It'll be okay, Princess," I assured her.

"It will." Princess Sophia nodded. "Roses is on your side."

Furiae paused for a moment, then replied, "Thank you." Her expression had relaxed somewhat at our words, but she still looked uneasy.

Maybe we shouldn't stay in Highland any longer than we strictly need to...

"First, introducing our prime minister..."

Regardless of the momentary chaos with the pope, all the participants had arrived and the ceremony had begun. The first order of business was a greeting from the prime minister, then a bunch of the sacred nobles and royalty would speak. That was when I realized something... *This is going to take absolutely ages, isn't it? Will it even end today?*

"Sophia, do you know the schedule for this event?" I asked.

"For the ceremony? Here," she said, handing over the program for the day.

It...was a ridiculously long program list. And I was pretty much the last thing on it. Until then, all I'd be doing was waiting.

I looked at the list.

The Grandsage (Absent)

Rosalie, the Crimson Witch (Absent)

Lucky them! I thought in jealousy. Man...I was bored. Could I maybe slip away?

"Sophia," I whispered. "I'm going to get a drink."

There was a long pause. She looked at me intently.

"Make sure you are back for when you're called," she reminded me. Busted—she'd seen through my excuse and knew I wanted to slack off. Still, with her permission (or not), I could kill some time somewhere.

Stealth. I was only using the skill to make sure I didn't disturb anyone, but just as I tried to leave, I was interrupted.

"Where are you going, Makoto?" Lucy asked quietly.

"Takatsuki, it's right in the middle of the ceremony," Sasa scolded me.

Furiae stared at me pointedly. "Just sit still, my knight."

Seriously, how did they have such sharp powers of perception?

"I'm just going for a walk..." I mumbled.

"Wait up, I'll come with you."

"No fair, Lu! Me too!"

"What?! If you're going, my knight, then so am I!"

Ack, this was turning into a full-on outing.

"So, where are we going?" Sasa asked.

I hadn't made any real plans. There were a few hours before it would be my turn, but going too far probably wasn't the best idea. Eventually, I came up with something.

"Well, if I want advice, who better to ask than the Grandsage?"

"Uh...won't she be in a bad mood at this time of day?" Sasa asked.

Lucy nodded. "Her place is all gloomy and kinda unnerving."

Neither seemed entirely on board—both decided to pass.

"What about you?" I asked Furiae.

"The White Grandsage's estate... I've got some words to say to her about taking you."

Well, Furiae felt like joining in, so the two of us used *Stealth* to sneak out. Because of the ceremony, there weren't many knights stationed around the castle as a whole. The ones on watch didn't notice us, and we soon made our way to the Grandsage's estate.

"Hi!" I called as we entered. Furiae trailed cautiously behind.

The combination of the candles and my *Night Vision* skill revealed the familiar building as we moved through it. As we entered a large room, I saw the Grandsage positioned on a large sofa. She was breathing softly. *She looks just like a kid when she's asleep.*

“She’s resting, my knight. Perhaps we shouldn’t have just wandered in...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m her guardian knight.”

“I don’t think that means what you think it does.”

“Let’s just hang around until she wakes up.”

“Wha...?”

She looked exasperated, but I didn’t pay it any mind.

Instead, I started poking around the place for anything interesting. I wasn’t *stealing* stuff...just looking. The Grandsage had all sorts of books and magic tools. I’d wanted to have a proper look around for ages.

Furiae selected a rare-looking book from the shelves and started flipping through it. I headed farther into the room, wondering if there was anything unusual. *I might even borrow something if it looks interesting.*

Suddenly, I did come across something.

“What the...?”

Hidden behind a bunch of bookshelves was a weirdly empty space. In the middle of it was a huge, rectangular box that looked big enough to fit a person.

Is this...a coffin?

It was. A pitch-black coffin. What was this doing here? Well, the Grandsage was a vampire, so was this her bed? Although...she was currently sleeping on the sofa.

Hmmm, then what’s this for? I crept closer out of curiosity...even though I obviously couldn’t open it.

“What’re you doing?”

“Whoa?!” I leaped back in shock. The Grandsage had appeared right behind me.

“You’re a bad person—sneaking into a home while the owner is asleep. What’s this supposed to be, some *nighttime* visit?”

“Yeah, that’s what it is,” I replied.

“Moron. Who brings a woman with them for that kind of thing? Come back here.”

“Sure,” I replied, moving toward her. I hadn’t really been able to mess with that coffin.

“So, what are you here for?” she asked. “The ceremony is underway, isn’t it?”

“Well, you are here, so as your guardian knight, it is only right that I spend my time with you, no?” I grinned.

She smirked back. “Well said.”

Then, she brewed some tea for Furiae and me.

That’s nice of her. I sipped at the tea. I thought Furiae might speak up, but she stayed quiet. Instead, the Grandsage carried the conversation.

“That reminds me—after today, I will be away for a while.”

“You will?” I asked.

“Indeed, Forneus has been sighted off Caol Ilan.”

“What? That’s a big deal!” Was this really the time for ceremonies?!

“It is likely just a threat. Iblis will be back soon, so there is unlikely to be an actual attack until then.”

Forneus was the demon lord that ruled the sea monsters. I was sorta interested—I figured I might be able to help a bit if we were fighting on or in the ocean.

“On another note... Both of you, be careful of the pope. He has been decidedly upset since I took you as my guardian knight. He probably has some sort of plan.”

That was perfect timing.

“Speaking of, we had the displeasure of meeting him just earlier.” Furiae scowled.

“The current pope is a real hater of other religions. He has his reasons...but we need to avoid internal conflict until after Iblis is defeated.”

“You can say that again,” I replied. I was in *full* agreement on that front. But it seemed sidestepping trouble with him wouldn’t be easy, considering how he’d been acting. *That reminds me...* “Oh yeah, the Hero of the Sun, Alexander, was with him.”

“Him... I do not know the details myself, but he turned up out of nowhere about half a year ago. His strength is not in question, though. I had no idea there was someone with such mana and aura who was unaffiliated with a deity. I’d thought we had found all we could on the continent... But perhaps he hails from another. I considered that he might be an otherworlder...but that seems to not be the case.”

“Huh...”

What a weirdo. He’d changed completely in personality as well.

“I-Incidentally!” Furiae said, breaking her silence.

“Hm?” the Grandsage replied.

“I-I would appreciate you not taking my guardian knight as your own without permission!”

“Oh?” The Grandsage grinned, baring her fangs. “Jealous?”

“I-I am not! What are you even implying?!”

“Serving multiple people as a guardian knight is hardly rare. There is no real inconvenience to it.”

That’s right! You gotta use what you have!

“Still, he *is* using four of the five contracts... I may have recommended it, but four is a lot. Perhaps the *Blood Contract* was excessive.”

“Hm?”

Four? I had one with Noah—*Soul*—one with Furiae—*Spoken*—and one with the Grandsage—*Blood*.

“But I only have three?”

“What do you mean?” she replied. “I may not have noticed before, but you have a contract of the body as well. With that redhead. Well, a temporary contract like that won’t show up in your Soul Book...but I can still see it.”

What? “That redhead” would mean Lucy. There was a *Body Contract* between us?

“M-My knight...when did you?” Furiae, at my side, was looking betrayed. She was shaking slightly.

Hold on! This was a misunderstanding! Right?

“So, my knight! When did the two of you make a contract with your bodies?!” she demanded.

Seriously...I don’t remember doing anything like that. I’d researched them a bit after Princess Sophia had read me the riot act about not knowing what contracts I had.

A *Body Contract* was exactly what the name implied—a physical relationship bound the contract. Incidentally, it had nothing to do with gender, so it’d be fine to have one with Prince Leonardo as well— *What am I even thinking?!*

“Waitwaitwait! Lucy and I haven’t done anyth— Actually, there was that time we went drinking... I don’t remember what happened. Or maybe when she and Sasa came onto me. Actually, that day... What?! Wait, what about the day before yesterday?!”

“How many possibilities can you think of...?” Furiae asked with a glare.

Well, I couldn’t help it! Lucy was always so assertive.

Makoto, she’s talking about the Love Contract*,* Noah said. *Love Contract*...? The thing that happens when we kiss?

Ah, okay. Maybe people started calling it a Body Contract *recently?* Right, just a difference in terminology.

“Grandsage, apparently the contract we have is a *Love Contract*,” I relayed.

She looked up at me questioningly. “A *Love*—? Elementalist, that’s a nickname. Some romanticist started calling it that. You don’t actually need romantic feelings to create that contract.”

“Huh...”

Oh...really? Noah murmured.

She and I both sounded surprised. Hang on, Noah didn’t know either...?

“Only virgins call it that,” said the Grandsage, silencing both of us. “Well, I suppose that’s why you’d use that name.”

There you go, Noah.

*S-So what?! A “*Body Contract*” sounds obscene!* she growled.

“So, my knight, what’s the conclusion?”

“My innocence is proven!” I proclaimed.

“Is it now...?” she asked with a doubtful look.

“Well, a *Body Contract* is usually a marriage. But a temporary contract implies that you won’t be tied down to a single woman and are still going to play the field. Our elementalist is quite the player for a virgin.”

I had no words. It hadn’t proven my innocence at all! Furiae was once again looking at me like I was trash.

“Well, I would prefer he stays chaste, so I don’t mind,” said the Grandsage. “Come on, Elementalist, hand over my usual.”

“Sure, sure,” I replied. After all, you had to pay the entrance fee when you visited a venue.

I sat down on the sofa she’d been sleeping on. She put her teeth to my throat and latched on...or, that’s what I expected to happen. Instead, her small tongue traced its way along my neck, sending a chill down my spine.

“G-Grandsage?!” I yelped.

She chuckled. “You’re always pleasant,” she murmured, stroking my skin. “Your body is just as clean as your blood. I never would have thought you were an adventurer.”

I sighed. “Well, I use water magic every morning and night to shower, and if I get sweaty, I get rid of it right away.”

“Huh, you do?” Furiae asked in surprise. “That sounds nice. Do it for me at some point too.”

“I did it for Sasa, but she said it tickled like I was touching her everywhere,” I warned.

“How filthy... I’ll pass.”

“By the way, Grandsage, aren’t you going to— What are you doing?!”

Suddenly, she’d started to pull my shirt off.

“Hm? Well, always using your neck gets boring,” she said, tracing delicate fingers over my chest. She looked about twelve years old or so. At first, it was almost like she was a kid playing around, but knowing her actual age made the gesture feel oddly alluring. Her large red eyes looked up at me as she put a cold hand on my cheek.

“Now then...time to punish my rude servant for sneaking into where I sleep.”

I gave a long pause. “I’m your guardian knight, not your servant,” I pointed out.

“Close enough.”

Was it? During that exchange, she kept pulling my clothes off. Though she wasn’t using her hands, *something* was deftly undoing my buttons. Was this...spatial manipulation?

I sat back and watched her magic, feeling impressed by it. Then, a yell came from my side.

“M-My knight! Why are you just letting her do that?!” Furiae demanded, her cheeks red.

“Sorry, Grandsage, Princess isn’t happy with it, so no more.”

“Miser,” she complained. She then put her arms around my back and sank her teeth into my neck like normal. Actually, not like normal. She didn’t just have her arms around me—she’d even wrapped her legs around my waist like some sort of koala.

Whew, this is kinda hot. I listened to her drink my blood down until she

licked up the final drops and healed the punctures with a touch.

"Well then, now that I've had my fill, I am going to rest until my trip. You can use the place however you like." After that, she fell back onto the sofa. She seemed kinda tired. Normally, she would keep chatting.

Maybe she's still exhausted after the last fight?

"Grandsage, will you be all right in Caol Ilan?" I said to her back. "Make sure you rest up proper—"

I hadn't expected a response, but an answer interrupted me regardless. "You worry about yourself. Things are about to get much more difficult for you."

"That's not going to happen. I'll just leave the strong guys to Sakurai."

Honestly, it felt like the last battle was going to be the worst of it. As long as we watched out for the *Clouds of Darkness*, Sakurai was pretty much unbeatable. I'd just be taking things easy far from the front lines. Obviously, though, I'd go help him if he needed it.

"No. Things are going to get much more difficult for *you*."

She said it as if it was set in stone. It almost sounded like...

"Is that *Future Sight*?" I asked. Had she foreseen me befalling some terrible fate?

"Not exactly. I can only see about a minute ahead, not the distant future."

"Even that much is pretty unfair, isn't it?" That level of clairvoyance was pretty much perfect for positioning during a fight.

"Whoops. It's a secret—make sure you don't tell Rosalie."

"You told *me* pretty easily..."

"I'm heading to sleep now. Don't wake me up." Suddenly, I heard soft breathing coming from her. *She must have actually gone to sleep.*

I really wanted to hear *what* in my future was going to be hard... *Some other time, I guess.* I glanced over at Furiae and found her eyes fixed on me.

"Princess?"

"I'm heading back," she replied after a moment, stalking off toward the entrance.

"Whoa, hold up!" I rushed after her. "What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Are you angry?"

"I am not!"

She sure seemed like she was. Neither of us said anything after that—I just followed her silently as she left the estate.

"Why did you even bring me?" she finally snapped. "You're her guardian knight, aren't you?"

"Well, I was yours first."

"Hmph! A likely story! After how you were so touchy-feely with her!"

"That's pretty much how it always is."

"She's always...?" Her eyes widened in shock as she turned to me. *I suppose the Grandsage may have been a touch more extreme this time.*

Furiae let out a tired sigh and sank down onto a nearby bench. I sat next to her. She wore an unhappy frown.

"I'm thirsty," she murmured.

Oh, was this my chance to get out of the doghouse?

"Wait a minute," I said, pulling a cup and some fruit from my snack pack. The fruit was something tropical-looking—it was easily preserved by keeping it cool.

Water Magic: Ice Cutter.

I used ice blades to peel it, remove the seeds, and blitz the fruit as a whole. I conjured even finer ice crystals and mixed them throughout the pulp, then slid everything into the cup. I handed it over to her, wishing I had a straw as well.

"What's this?" she asked.

"An Otherworld Tropical Smoothie."

"I'll try it..." Doubtfully, she took a sip. Then she exclaimed, "This is amazing!" before practically chugging it down.

Ah...if you drink that fast—

"Ow, my head! Is this a curse?!"

"You shouldn't drink iced things so quickly..." I said, explaining about brain freezes and prompting her to take another, slower sip.

She cheered up again. Girls really do love smoothies! (Just a bit of a stereotype.)

This drink was something Fujiyan and I had come up with—it should be popular in this world. However, Nina had said it'd cost too much to hire someone that could make them with water magic like I did, so ultimately, the idea had never been used.

"Aaah." Furiae sighed happily. "That was delicious. You need to make it

again.”

“Sure, any time. You’re the first one to try it, so I’m glad you enjoyed.”

“I was the first... Hmmm.” As she sat on the bench, she swung her legs in the air. It was a habit of hers when she was in a good mood. “Say, my knight. You and that merchant are always thinking up new products. What else is there?”

“I can only really help with water magic... But Fujiyan’s got a whole bunch of ideas.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, lately...” I quickly launched into an explanation of one of his more recent projects.

Eventually, after killing enough time, Furiae and I headed back to the castle. Lucy and Sasa were both snoozing against each other, and the ceremony itself was still going on.

I think they’re from Great Keith, I considered as I looked at the person onstage.

“You took your time.” Princess Sophia shot me a glare.

I apologized as I sat down in my chair. “How’s it going?”

“You should be called in an hour.”

An hour... That was ages away. When I glanced up at the stage again, I noticed something: the warrior from Great Keith was talking about how great their country was.

“Sophia, do I have to do that as well?” I asked.

“Of course you do... Have you not thought of a speech?”

I’d been given homework?! “I...haven’t...”

“I told you over and over.” She sighed. “Fine, let’s think of something together.”

“Right...”

Furiae glowered at me—apparently, I’d picked the wrong time to run away from my obligations.

“Start by introducing yourself,” said Princess Sophia. “State your position.”

“It’s ‘hero,’ right?”

“‘State-Authorized Hero General Makoto Takatsuki of the Roses Royal Family’ is your official title.”

Huh, didn't know that. It's really that long?

"Then, after that..."

"Uh... So if I..."

"You should make it a little longer. Also..."

Thanks to her help, we just about made it—I even managed to get everything out without tripping over my tongue. I felt almost faint standing in front of nearly ten thousand people. Though, if it had been ten thousand monsters, I would've been fine.

"Calm down, Takatsuki," Sakurai soothed from behind me.

Chances are, I would've bolted if not for his encouragement. *He really* is *handsome, inside and out...* Oh, the award itself? It was some money and land or something. I hadn't really been listening.

With that, our business in Highland was finally over.

However, Iblis would be resurrected in a few days, and then the heroes would all reconvene in Highland again anyway. We could head back to Roses temporarily...but that was more effort. We were thinking over what we should do when a messenger arrived with a letter.

A letter from the pope.

Remnants of the Snake Sect had been sighted near the capital.

◇

"Makoto, do we really have to pay attention to his requests?" Lucy asked.

"Right! He was so awful to Fuu! It was like something out of an ero-doujin!"

"What's an ero-doujin?" Furiae asked.

"Oh! I know!" Lucy exclaimed. "Where the girls say 'just kill me,' right?"

"Lu...how do you know that?"

Furiae threw her hands up. "I have no idea what either of you are talking about."

The three girls continued chattering away. Currently, we were a short distance from the capital poking around some ruins. This was a village that'd been destroyed by a stampede a few decades ago. It had been

uninhabited for a while, but there were rumors that the Snake Sect was now using it. We were here at the pope's request to find out whether that intel was true.

"It's not like we have much of a choice," I pointed out. "Princess Sophia's in a tricky position."

Roses had some Temple Knights, though not many—because of our nation's lack of defensive personnel, they were on loan from Highland. They fulfilled a similar role to the police in this world and were an indispensable part of public order. However, their allegiance was to the church. In other words, the head of said church could, at any time, recall them "to defend against Iblis." This would put Roses in a terrible position.

Of course, such a thing would normally never happen...but refusing the pope could make him go after Furiae again. Thus, we decided to just go along with his request for now.

"So, are any of the sect here?" Furiae asked, clinging to Sasa's sleeve and peering around.

As her guardian knight, it would normally be my role to act as her shield...but she was honestly safest with Sasa.

Scout. I scanned for enemies as we traipsed through the ruins. I saw nothing, though. *Well,* Scout *only has about a hundred-meter radius...*

One of us was far better than me at finding enemies, though.

"How's it going, Lucy?" I asked.

"Hm, nothing. Can't hear a thing." Her hearing had a longer range and was more precise than my skill. So if she couldn't hear *anything*...

"It's a false lead, huh?" I said.

"Then what're we doing hanging around here?" Sasa asked. "Shall we head back?"

"Hmm..." If there truly was no one here, we didn't have any reason to keep looking. I did consider something though—maybe they just weren't here *now*. *We should stick it out for a bit longer.*

"We'll wait for a while and head back if no one turns up," I decided.

Sasa nodded in agreement. "Sure."

"Hmph." Furiae seemed less content with the plan. "And after we came all the way out here."

"Better safe than sorry," Lucy said.

We settled down to wait, relaxing in the shade. My *Scout* was active, and

Lucy was paying attention, so an ambush was pretty unlikely.

Thirty minutes or so had passed when I heard a voice.

No... Mak...! Get...of...!

Noah? She sounded so far away. Goddess, what's wrong?

No answer. Weird.

But then...

Thud.

It was a small noise—someone landed on the ground. It seemed as though they'd been flying. I hadn't even noticed their presence until they were right in front of me. *That's terrifying! They're so quick and quiet...* I felt my skin erupt in goose bumps.

The man standing in front of us was wearing white armor emblazoned with the goddess's emblem. A Temple Knight.

This was the Hero of the Sun, Alexander.

But...why didn't Scout *react to him?*

"Hey, what a coincidence," he said brazenly, a slight smile on his face.

Coincidence? In a place as deserted as this? No way.

Silently, I readied my dagger. Lucy lifted her staff and Sasa stood in front of Furiae, who was glaring dubiously at Alexander.

He grinned openly. "If I could, just let me take that priestess."

"Like hell," I said, refusing immediately.

He seemed to have expected that since he didn't look surprised in the least. "Sure, but you don't actually have the right to say no." He shrugged.

"Did the pope put you up to this?" I asked.

"Nope. This is all me." His face was still fixed in an easy grin. Even if he hadn't been sent by the pope directly, this whole excursion out of town had been a trap fueled by ideas the pope had set into motion... We shouldn't have come.

"Sasa," I said.

"I'll protect her!" she exclaimed fiercely. I called out to the elementals; Lucy readied her mana.

The hero in front of us just kept grinning. He didn't make any other moves. "Come on! Resistance is pointless. Just hand her over before you get hurt." He seemed to view this as a done deal.

When we still didn't acquiesce, he apparently decided to force things

along. “Haah... I’ve never really enjoyed picking on the weak, but... Hm?” He stopped midway through the statement and glanced up. I followed suit.

Something was closing on us fast.

“Furiae!”

“Takatsuki! Aya!”

Sakurai! He and Yokoyama swooped in on a swift pegasus. Sakurai leaped from the pegasus and stood in front of us. Phew! The Hero of Light was here. We could relax.

“We heard from Princess Noelle that the pope was planning on capturing Furiae,” Sakurai explained.

Alexander sighed.

“So *you’re* here too. But I was told I couldn’t hurt you...”

Alexander didn’t seem fazed, even with Sakurai in his way. I glanced up, and while there were some clouds, it was nothing like when we’d fought the demon lord. Even in dappled sunlight, Sakurai was practically all-powerful. So why was Alexander so relaxed?

“Move, Hero of Light,” he said haughtily.

“I will not,” Sakurai answered, drawing his sword.

Lucy, Yokoyama, and I moved so we could support him.

In contrast to our wariness, the Hero of the Sun still seemed utterly at ease. He sighed again. “What a pain.”

Then, there was a roar—massive waves of aura billowed off Alexander’s body.

Suddenly, Sakurai began to glow, and we were all engulfed in light. His aura must’ve been protecting us from Alexander’s. Though Sakurai’s was much quieter and calmer, it was a match for the aura coming off the Hero of the Sun.

“Alec, Hero of the Sun. We should not be fighting here. Withdraw.”

“Of course, Hero of Light. I am not here to fight.”

“Then—”

Alexander spoke right over him. “As long as I take that priestess with me.”

“I cannot allow that.”

“Then negotiations are over.”

What about this could be considered a negotiation?! Alexander had just made demands without listening to us.

“Don’t come any closer,” Sakurai warned harshly.

“Ryousuke...” I heard Furiae murmur uneasily.

The Hero of Light was supposed to be the strongest, so it should be fine...right?

Alexander’s smile didn’t falter as he continued closing in on us.

Sakurai narrowed his eyes. “I’ll go easy on you, so don’t blame me.” He swung his sword, striking the other man with the flat of the blade.

But Alexander snatched Sakurai’s sword out of the air with his bare hand.

“What?!” Yokoyama exclaimed in shock.

“Did you think such a sloppy blow would do anything to me?” Alexander asked. His other hand swiftly darted toward Sakurai’s face.

“Guh!” Sakurai grunted, backing off.

“Oh, you dodged? Maybe I held back too much as well.” The Hero of the Sun kept smiling pleasantly. “Come on! Stop this pointlessness and give her to me.”

“Fine then. I’ll attack properly this time,” Sakurai snarled, his body and sword shining like they had when he’d defeated Zagan.

Instantly, he vanished from my sight.

Flash, Sword of Light!

There was a small burst of light and an explosion. Then, a blast of wind sent dust scattering in the air around us.

I saw something fly away—a person.

“What the...?” I heard someone ask dazedly.

The figure...was Sakurai.

Unconscious.

Chapter 4 — Makoto Takatsuki Despairs

My mouth fell open, and a dull noise of shock made its way past my lips.

Sakurai—the Hero of Light—had *lost*? The same guy who had taken down a demon lord in a single hit...?

"No way..." Furiae murmured. It was impossible to believe...but Sakurai was lying unconscious on the ground behind us. That was our reality.

"Ryousuke!" Yokoyama yelled. She rushed over to him and started pulling out restoratives. He didn't seem like he was coming around anytime soon though. I heard footsteps tap their way toward us.

"Well, I'll be taking the moon priestess now."

Lucy and I reacted to Alexander's words.

Right Arm of the Elemental. My arm started to glow blue as I gathered mana. "*Ice Magic (King Rank): Ice Phoenix*!"

"*Fire Magic (King Rank): Fire Phoenix*!" Lucy cried.

Because I had to borrow mana, it meant that my spell took a little longer to cast than usual—it activated at the same time as Lucy's chanted fire version.

The huge blue and red birds seemed to intertwine as they pierced through the Hero of the Sun with a massive explosion. That power would have been enough to take down even a dragon. But...

"Bah, how tiresome," he said, completely unruffled in the middle of the blast.

He wasn't hurt at all?!

"Do not resist, moon priestess," he continued, suddenly whirling behind us, so fast that I didn't even see the motion.

"L-Let me go!" Furiae demanded. There was a pause, and then, "My *Charm* didn't work?! Why?!"

Alexander gripped her in a single hand. Sasa and I moved to try and

help. However, before I knew what was going on, there was a loud *bang*—I went flying several meters back. I could taste blood in my mouth and my entire body was screaming in pain. Lucy was crumpled next to me, blood dripping down her lip.

"Lucy! Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine..."

She sounded like she was in pain, but she was at least conscious. Sasa had flown in the other direction. What had he done?

"You! I have a *Curse of Vengeance*. If you hurt me, the same will happen to you! If you kill me, you will die!"

Right! I forgot about that!

Alexander just scratched his head awkwardly. "Curses have no effect on me."

"L-Let me go! Damn you, you oaf!"

"Silence, woman."

"Urk!"

The Hero of the Sun tightened his hand around her throat. What was he even doing?!

"A...aach."

"See? What of your curse? My neck is completely unharmed." He guffawed.

The fucker's getting off on choking her! My anger was about to explode. I was going to attempt to cast elemental magic with the full force of my rage...but someone else moved first.

"Let her go!"

Sasa—wreathed in a prismatic glow—launched a punch into him. She was using her *Action Game Player* subskill, *Superstar*. It was her ultimate move.

That kind of attack should work on anyone!

"Oh?"

For the first time, the grin slipped from Alexander's face. Instead, he looked intrigued.

"Interesting. You can enter my divine realm," he remarked, blocking her fist.

"Gurgh." Sasa scowled.

He stopped a *Superstar* punch?! That skill was supposed to ignore all defenses!

"Huh. Your blow was even somewhat painful," he said, offering a scowl of his own. "My turn."

Now *his* fist started glowing in a rainbow of colors. No, it was *burning*. It seemed almost like her *Superstar* skill... I felt a chill run down my spine.

If that hits her...

"Sasa, run!"

"Too late!" the hero sneered.

A moment later, there was a flash—his fist pierced through Sasa's body with a horrifying *crunch*.

Lucy shrieked at the sight. "Ahhhh!"

Alexander's arm was sticking right through Sasa's chest.

What...happened? I couldn't understand what I was seeing.

Sasa shuddered, coughing, blood spraying from her mouth.

S-Sasa? No...

"Oh dear. I killed her."

Alexander's voice brought me back down to earth. Sasa's body started to glow white, and then suddenly, she vanished.

"Oh...!" Lucy exclaimed quietly.

That was probably another of Sasa's skills triggering—*Extra Lives*. At least, that's what the part of my brain kept lucid by *Calm Mind* was telling

me. Regardless, I'd already lost my equilibrium.

"Ah...guh..." Furiae was on the verge of passing out. Drool seeped from her mouth. Lucy chanted a spell next to me, words coming out between sobs. I noticed that it was a saint rank spell. *It probably won't do anything to him. No, Furiae will be dead before the spell even activates.* Sakurai was still passed out, and Yokoyama didn't look like she could help.

Noah?

No response.

I cranked *Calm Mind* up to 100%. *Think. Think... There has to be something...*

Got it!

An *RPG Player* selection screen drifted up in front of me.

```
Surrender your body and defeat the Hero of the Sun?
▶Yes
No
```

I didn't hesitate. It was my only option. This was all I could do to take down the bastard that had killed Sasa.

I glanced to my side—Lucy was still chanting, though her body trembled violently.

"Sorry, Lucy," I whispered.

"M-Makoto?"

Sorry... Noah, I thought to my goddess.

I couldn't hear her reply.

Baring my enchanted right arm, I placed the tip of my dagger on *that* spot—on the bit of anima Noah had left behind. This, my goddess's miracle, had kept the elemental properties contained to my right arm, unable to spread to the rest of my body. But, if that spot was destroyed...

I plunged the godslaying blade into the anima, shattering it.

The blue glow began to encroach. From my arm, to my shoulder, to the rest of my limbs, more and more, it devoured my body.

I couldn't stop it.

Give me the power to save her and defeat him, I prayed, pouring my life span into the *Suicide Magic*.

◇ Alexander the Godchild's Perspective ◇

It should have been a boring job.

Grandpa Pope had told me to capture the moon priestess. He'd said that the wicked deity's follower would probably interfere. He'd even given me permission to use force—if they didn't listen to my words, I could complete the job with my fists.

I hadn't expected the Hero of Light to interfere. That hero of Great Keith had also been surprisingly strong. *None of this was going right.* My irritation had gotten the better of me, and that was probably why I'd accidentally overdone it...and killed her. She'd vanished for some reason. However, there'd been no time to think about that before something even stranger had happened.

The State-Authorized Hero of Roses had suddenly used *Transform*. An odd blue glow had surged across his whole body.

This hero wasn't particularly strong. Compared to the Hero of Light and the one of Great Keith, he was far inferior. Yet despite that, he was currently surrounded by incredible amounts of mana. More and more poured forth, concentrating, compressing, and becoming dense around him.

This might be an issue. I lifted my right arm, gazing at the moon priestess trapped in my grip. *I can surely take on the Hero of Roses with just my left.*

Mist suddenly coalesced in front of me, transforming into a person. The Hero of Roses. He swung his dagger.

"What?!"

My body was covered in anima—even an orichalcum blade would chip before it even pricked my skin. And yet...

That hero...that dagger...severed my right arm.

Such a piddling blade managed to break my skin? More than pain, I felt acutely surprised.

My arm, along with the moon priestess, fell limply to the ground.

"Fuuri!" yelled the redheaded elf, rushing over to her.

"Urgh..."

The priestess still seemed woozy. The elf shouldered her weight.

Tch. Damn annoyances. I went to strike at them but then remembered that I lacked my right arm.

"*Sun Magic: Regeneration*," I cast. The limb sprouted anew, and I flexed my hand to make sure everything was working.

Good, no problems.

I glared at the glowing hero in front of me. For harming me, he deserved the worst punishment I could imagine. Then, he said something.

"××××××××××××××××."

I couldn't catch it—they were unfamiliar words. But suddenly, a massive vortex surrounded me, and a pillar of water darkened the sky. Peering at it more closely, I could discern writhing shapes—a massive, teeming horde of water dragons.

Hundreds... No, thousands...?

With my attention diverted, the elf and priestess managed to escape, along with the collapsed Hero of Light.

The dragons wound around me and the Hero of Roses. Was he trying to change where we would fight? Cunning.

Angry, I used my newly regenerated arm to strike at him. An explosion tore through the air, producing deafening shock waves. Around me, the hundreds of water dragons were blasted away. I was satisfied—one punch from me could take down a whole castle, so the Hero of Roses would be nothing but a fine mist now. *The fool deserves it for standing against me.* My lips twisted in fierce joy.

It was, however, another extraneous death. I'd probably be hearing about it from the old man. I'd need to think up some excuse.

In an instant, the mist reformed in front of me.

"What...?"

It's not...possible... He had been blown apart, split down to nothing. His body should be irreparable. And yet, he was in front of me once again, glowing blue and riding one of the dragons he had made.

"××××××××××××××××," he muttered, again, something I couldn't hear. More and more dragons wound around me. I'd never seen this kind of spell before. It was an odd one... An impressive one too. After all, he had managed to survive a strike from me. Well, this resistance was still pointless.

How tiresome...my Appraisal (Divine Rank) *can see all of his weaknesses.* As I activated the skill, I felt a touch of pity. *Before long, your third-rate magic will be nothing.*

Personal Name: Makoto Takatsuki
Race: Elemental Lord of Water *Embodiment of all the world's water*
Strength: Incalculable
Stamina: Incalculable
Will: Incalculable
Agility: Incalculable
Appearance: Incalculable
Physique: Incalculable
Intelligence: Incalculable
Wisdom: Incalculable
Sanity: Incalculable
Equipment: Godslaying Blade *A dagger made from a fragment of the sickle wielded by Chronos in Titanomachia*
Combat method: Remove all water from the world

What...in...the...?

Almost everything about him was...inhuman. What exactly was I up against? And that dagger! That was a *relic*! A weapon from Titanomachia! What was it doing in a mortal's hands?! Whoever gave that thing to him... What were they thinking?!

Even as my thoughts raced, the mana around him was growing and growing. No, it wasn't simply increasing... It was gathering at an explosive rate.

He hadn't said a word since he'd launched his attack. The blue figure simply stared at me, expressionless. However, he was *clearly* hostile. I felt my heart skip a beat. I'd never experienced anything like this before.

"Begone!" I demanded, attacking in earnest. The last time I'd used my full strength, I'd blasted away an entire mountain. I'd held back ever since. But this...

"This is the end!" I screamed, striking him with all that power. The blow broke through the sound barrier, and my aura would explode as it struck.

There won't even be dust left of him.

But my fist stopped, still plunged into his body. The aura that should have exploded...was being held in.

Impossible. M-My aura was...overwhelmed? I have the power of the gods! How can some puny human magic stop me? How is this possible?! What the hell is he?!

I panicked and pulled back.

"××××××××××××××××××××××××."

I *still* had no idea what he was saying. Suddenly, a blue-skinned woman appeared at his side. It felt like I could see several of them. Was that...Undyne? Was she lending him power?

My mind flashed back to a conversation I'd had with the Priestess of Fortune.

◇

"Are you listening, Alexander? You are not to face the Titans' elemental weapons." Those were the haughty words I remembered her using.

The Titans were a race of gods the Olympians had fought against. Legends said that the Titans had manipulated nature itself—the earth, wind, and so on—giving each element a will of its own and transforming them into weapons. These elements of nature had names: Salamander, Undyne, Sylph, and Gnome.

There were also, apparently, elemental beings who were even stronger. The mortals called them the elemental lords, and the gods called them elemental weapons. These lords were the most devout among the gods' followers—at least, once they were sacrificed. Their strength was monstrous, and they could be used to destroy the world as a whole. It was said that even a star would be no match for their power.

Therefore, as the war against the Titans ended, the Olympians had destroyed all the elemental lords. Attempting to recreate them was utterly taboo.

"You are strong, but you are a young hero," the Priestess of Fortune had said. "You need to avoid fighting against the direct followers of wicked gods and against the elemental weapons. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, whatever. I get it." I'd let her words flow over me, thinking only

about how noisy she was. Back then, I'd wanted to meet someone capable of beating me.

◇

And now, the blue figure—the wicked deity's war machine—was gaining even more mana.

The water dragons numbered in the tens of thousands now, blotting out the sky. It almost looked as if the sky itself was another ocean. The Elemental Lord of Water, embodiment of all the world's water...fought by removing all water from the world.

I couldn't... I was going to—

"D-Don't mock me! I am the Hero of the Sun! I cannot lose!"

Come, Holy Sword!

A shining white sword appeared in front of me—I had received it from the royal family of Highland. Gripping the blade, I poured my anima into it. I hefted it, fingers tightening.

"Die!"

I swung at the hero. He looked down at me. Then, he quietly defended against it—a massive barrier of ice appeared in front of him.

That's a saint rank barrier?! It's seven-layered as well. Still!

I let loose a blast that could destroy a demon lord in a single strike. Dozens of ice shards shattered away as my blade met his.

Mine started to crack.

I could feel my face twisting. His barrier had broken, yet I could not get past the relic in his hand.

I had lost the exchange.

"Impossible..." My attacks weren't working. His mana was still ceaselessly increasing. It was inconceivable. I couldn't stand against that. *I have to run...but where?* He controlled all of the water on this planet—no place was safe from his power.

I realized that all of the circling dragons had their eyes fixed unerringly on me. Tens of thousands of eyes glared steadily.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" I screamed as I tried to slice at him again.

◇

The area under the water was dim. This was the abyss, where no sunlight could reach. How many hours had passed? Or had it been days? The Hero of Roses was in front of me, staring like the god of death.

Swirling around us were millions of water dragons. There was no way I could run now.

I couldn't defeat him. I couldn't kill him. I couldn't break him. I couldn't crush him. I could slice and stab, I could do anything, but over and over and over and over and over he came back.

I had infinite mana, but so did he. This contest would never end... No, that wasn't true. He had a relic. That made it possible to take my life. The glowing blue figure in front of me, the Elemental Lord of Water...would not stop until I was dead.

Why had I raised my hand against him...?

◇ Furiae Naya Laphroaig's Perspective ◇

Days had passed since Makoto Takatsuki—my knight—had died.

He had used the elementals to create a storm, vanishing along with the Hero of the Sun. He had saved me when I'd been on the verge of being taken.

These past few days have been...

I recalled, first, the rain—it poured for a while but eventually cleared up. We waited for him to return...to no avail. Princess Sophia searched ceaselessly. She was sure he was alive. As the days passed, though, the light faded from her eyes.

He was nowhere to be found.

Then, one day, she came to us with a statement from Eir.

Makoto Takatsuki is dead.

That was what the goddess said. Princess Sophia's face was carved from ice, frozen, bearing the weight of it. Her shoulders shook. She told us that she would arrange a state funeral.

I...wasn't able to say anything.

Aya couldn't stop crying. Her *Extra Lives* had brought her back from the dead—the skill had transported her somewhere safe, and she had apparently woken up a little ways from the battle. She'd rushed over, but by that point, there'd been nothing left to save.

At first, she'd rallied, yelling about helping him. She'd even tried to give chase after hearing that my knight had vanished with the Hero of the Sun. We'd somehow managed to stop her. Then, we'd had to keep her from killing the pope. After, she'd gone back to the inn and just cried.

"Takatsuki...why...?"

She'd barely had food or drink over the last few days. People fretted that she would start to waste away, but the lamia queen's constitution was hardier than it seemed. Her *mental* constitution on the other hand...

"I've had enough... Without him, I..."

Aya was strong, but without my knight, she crumbled. She still wasn't showing any sign of recovery.

Lucy just kept training.

"He's still alive!" she insisted, even when Princess Sophia had relayed Eir's words.

Lucy didn't believe it. She should have realized, though. She'd almost collapsed into tears but had risen again right away. Now, she kept training her magic, glaring at anyone nearby.

"I'll find him. I'll master *Teleport* and search for him, Aya, Fuuri!"

"Right...I'll come...with you too," Aya sniffled in response.

I barely managed to tell them I'd come along as well.

Maybe Lucy's bravado was a ruse to try and cheer the other girl up. It was almost like my knight had possessed her. She barely slept and just kept training.

Before, she'd been able to successfully *Teleport* about one in every ten attempts. Now, it was one in three, and without an incantation. Before long, she'd be one of the best casters of *Teleport* on the continent.

She was strong. Lucy was...such a strong person.

But I...couldn't do anything.

I didn't search for him. I didn't even cry. I didn't try to get stronger or *do* anything. I just couldn't accept reality. Days passed by in a haze.

And for that entire time, none of the three had blamed me even once.

Why? It's...my fault! It's because I'm the moon priestess! Because I'm cursed! That's *why my knight died! Why he's...gone.*

Without him, being in our party felt like lying on a bed of nails. I wanted to get away from it all. But that would be an affront to the others and all their strength...so I couldn't move. All I could do was listlessly let time pass

while trying to hold my emotions in, like I was holding my breath.

Six days had passed.

We were gathered in the cathedral of Anna the Holy Mother. Noelle was waiting there for us.

Suddenly, my emotions burst forth like a landslide.

“Noelle! Your hero attacked us!” I yelled, grabbing her by the lapel. She didn’t say anything, just looked away in apparent pain.

She dares to play the victim?!

“Furiae...stop it,” came Ryousuke’s voice.

“But!” I began, but I fell silent at the look on his face. He looked just as sad as Princess Sophia...if not more so.

I let Noelle go. He had been hurt as well because he’d been unable to protect my knight. Right...Ryosuke had known him the longest out of any of us. Of course he was hurt...

Why had things ended up like this? Was it because I’d made him my guardian knight? Did interacting with me bring misfortune to everyone...?

I didn’t know. I had no idea what the answer was.

Clicking footsteps approached. They belonged to the Priestess of Fortune, though she seemed different than before. Her eyes were glowing gold, and there was a surging mana—no, anima?—surrounding her. She also seemed to carry a grave atmosphere.

The priestess had seemed close to the Hero of the Sun, and so I wanted to rail against her as well. Yet for some reason...I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t open my mouth. I couldn’t even move my feet. That seemed to be the case for everyone around me—the mage, heroes, and Ryousuke were all silent.

The air was heavy.

“Everyone, we need to speak,” said the Priestess of Fortune, an indescribable pressure behind her words. “But first...”

She waved her right hand. Immediately, the windows all shut and a massive magic circle started to float in front of the door. Space shifted—the air itself seemed to twist bizarrely.

Was this...a barrier? It felt even higher than saint rank. Was she a mage on this level? I didn’t remember her being so strong. Silence reigned in the face of the pressure she exuded. Even the sun priestess’s breath caught in

her throat.

"I would like to convey apologies for...the Hero of the Sun's rampage the other day... First, allow me to address your concerns."

The priestess muttered something. *What's happening?*

Gradually, a veritable rainbow of magic circles floated in the air. They looked almost like they formed a clock, and they were likely a type of fate magic. I couldn't parse what this spell was for, but I could tell it was a considerably grand working.

Then, I heard a quiet murmur.

Fate Magic: Miracle of Resurrection.

Magic circles formed in front of her, glowing even brighter. Then, a white figure appeared, floating in them. Gradually, the pale figure gained color.

Th-That's...

Within the shining magic circles was my knight—Makoto Takatsuki.

Chapter 5 — Makoto Takatsuki Awakens

I opened my eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling.

It was dizzyingly high, easily more than ten meters above my head. Around me, stained glass artwork depicted angels and gods. *Where am I?* I wondered, looking around. But the moment I shifted, something jumped into my view.

"Makoto!"

"Takatsuki!"

Lucy and Sasa grabbed me, clinging with viselike strength.

Ugh... Can't breathe...

"L-Lucy, Sasa..."

I was about to tell them to calm down, but the words caught in my throat. Tears and snot were streaming down their faces.

U-Uh? Guys, I just woke up—what's going on? I was in the middle of fighting the Hero of the Sun, and then... I remember now!

"Sasa!"

"Wh-What?" she asked.

"He hurt you bad! How are your wounds?!"

"Huh? Oh! I'm fine. My *Extra Lives* brought me back good as new. Look." She rolled up her shirt to show her stomach. There wasn't a mark on it. "Want to check?"

She picked up my hand and held it to the spot where she'd been injured. *Her skin's so smooth... Wait, not the time!*

"I-I get it," I said awkwardly, lowering her shirt and pulling my hand back.

"No fair!" Lucy sulked, grabbing onto me again.

"Sorry. Are you all good too?" I asked.

"Yup. Fine."

She buried her head in my chest. Sasa joined in the cuddle pile as well.

“Hero Makoto,” said a voice from behind me.

“Sophia?”

“Fool...” she murmured. She placed a hand on each of my cheeks, and I noticed that she’d been crying.

What...had happened to me? My memories were still vague.

“When Eir told me you’d died...I...I...” She broke off.

I remained quiet for a long moment. “Sorry, Sophia.”

It was coming back to me now. As payment for the transformation, I’d died.

“Takatsuki!” yelled another familiar voice.

Guess it’s Sakurai’s turn now. “Hey,” I said, turning to him. “Looks like I worried you all.”

He gave a watery smile, though his tears still fell. “You really did. But I’m glad you’re alive.”

Have I seen everyone? Who’s left? Oh, right! Where’s Furiae?

I glanced around, looking this way and that, before spotting the black-haired beauty standing a little ways away. Her mouth was hanging open, and the expression didn’t exactly match her otherwise refined looks.

“Heeeyyy? Princess?” I called out. I stood, and then started to walk toward her.

Suddenly, Sakurai spoke up, his voice sounding strained. “T-Takatsuki! You should, uh, put on some clothes...”

“Hm?”

It was then that I realized...

I was buck naked.

Whaaaaat?! Why?!

Why had none of them told me?!

“Wear this, Makoto Takatsuki,” Estelle said, handing me a robe. I hadn’t seen her approach, but I hurriedly pulled on the offered garment. Phew.

I peered around again. Other than my party, Princess Sophia and her guards were present, along with Princess Noelle and her guards, Sakurai, and Estelle. What a strange lineup. Needless to say, the Hero of the Sun was not here. The pope was also absent.

Turning to Estelle, I asked the question that was on my mind. “Ira, was it you who brought me back?”

“It was. I used a *Miracle of Resurrection*.”

At her words, everyone around us practically jumped. Gradually, they all started backing away.

"Ira...you descended?" Princess Noelle asked, speaking for everyone. That prompted her guards, Princess Sophia's guards, and Lucy to immediately kneel. Sakurai and Sasa hurriedly followed suit.

Since this was the site of a goddess's descent onto the mortal plane, I should've been kneeling as well. However, I had a complaint to make.

"Ira. What happened back there with the Hero of the Sun? We were in real trouble. I want you to deal with it properly."

"S-Sir Makoto?!" Princess Noelle sputtered.

Princess Sophia's shock was nearly identical. "Hero Makoto?! Is that really the tone you want to use?!"

It's all good, guys. Ira's fairly nice.

"I can now explain what happened with the Hero of the Sun," Ira said. "Also, correct your use of the word 'fairly.' I am an *overwhelmingly* loving goddess."

"Sure."

"Noah's children are always so mouthy... Well, no matter."

See, she forgave me. Ira was just a bit *tsundere*. Oh yeah—I wanted to talk to Noah as well. She was probably angry about me dying, huh?

Noaaah? Are you watching?

Silence.

Was she *that* mad?

"Noah is indeed watching," Ira confirmed. "But I currently have a *Divine Barrier* in place, so her voice cannot reach you."

Got it. I'd have to apologize later.

"To the next point at hand," Ira continued. "I shall have someone explain the sequence of events that took place."

As she spoke, a huge magic circle appeared in the air. It was iridescent, shining with every color of the rainbow. *A summoning circle?* Who was she bringing through?

Suddenly, a torrent of mana blasted out of Estelle's body, and all of it was sucked in to the circle. No human could've contained that amount of power—any mortal would've run out of mana. A figure manifested within the circle, glowing bright with magic, and began to descend.

Princess Noelle gasped in surprise. "Wha...?"

The woman who'd appeared was tall, blonde, and wearing white armor. She was also gorgeous. Well, I got that impression, but because she was radiating so much light, it was impossible to look directly at her. She was definitely not human—intuitively, she felt like a being that existed above mere mortals.

"Raise your heads," she said.

That was when I realized that Princess Noelle, Sakurai, and Princess Sophia were on their knees once again. And it wasn't just them—Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae had also fallen to the floor. Everyone had their heads bowed, and it looked like they'd even forgotten to breathe.

Vacantly, I noticed that I was the only one still standing. Wait, no, Ira was on her feet as well, though she wore a more humble expression than usual.

Should...I be kneeling too?

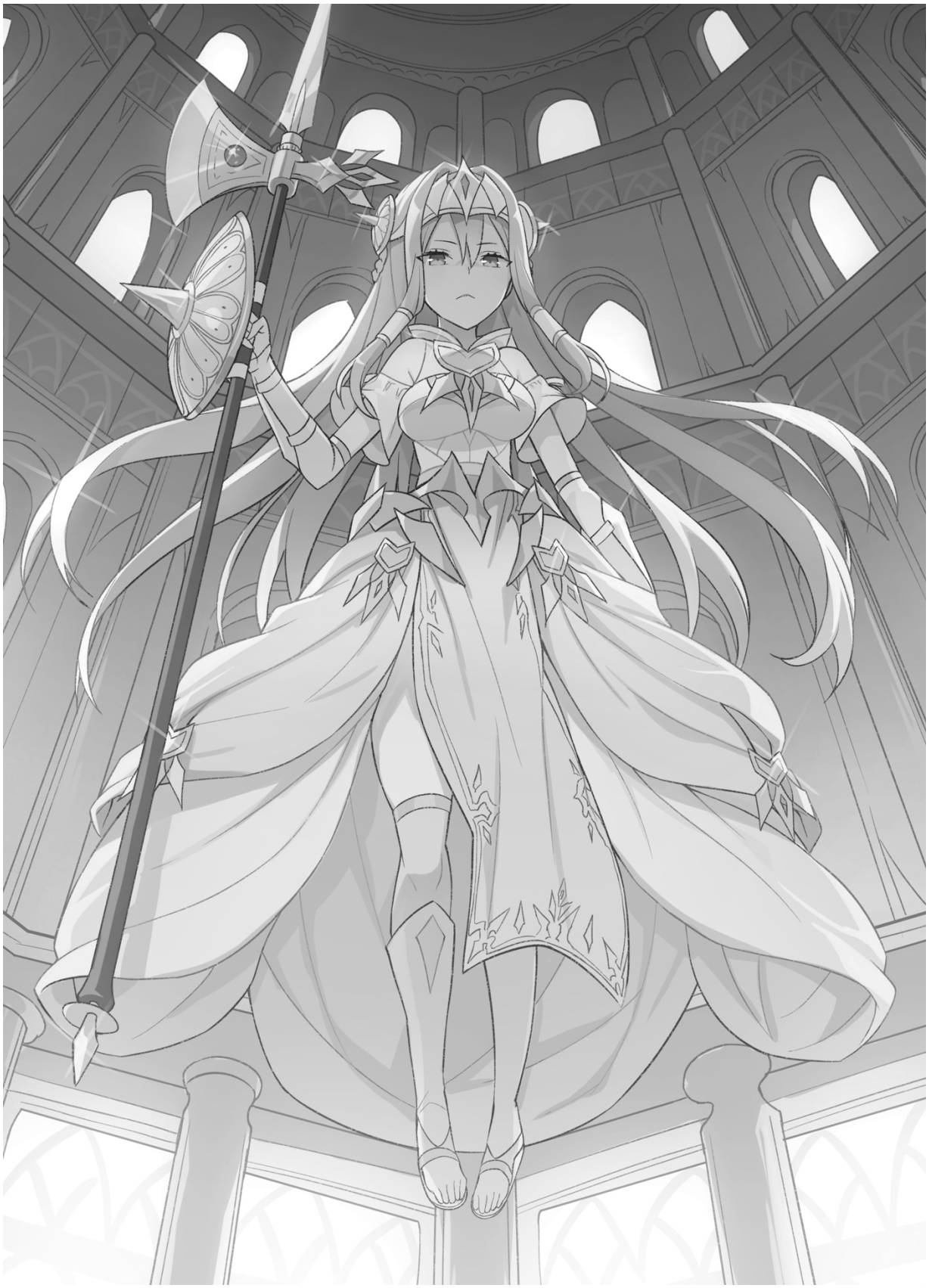
I exchanged a glance with Ira, but she didn't say anything. Even a *goddess* was deferring to the new arrival, which meant...

"I am Althena," said the woman. She spoke somewhat brusquely, as if confirming my mental speculation.

This was the Goddess of the Sun, Althena, ruler of the world...and she was standing right in front of me.

Everyone knew her as the leader of the seven goddesses, the divine governing pillar of the world. She was the eldest daughter of Jupiter and the goddess of both victory and justice. As the sun goddess, she was the figure worshiped by the majority of the faithful on this continent.

Her body was emitting so much light, and it was impossible to directly make out the details of her features. Her feet didn't even touch the floor as she floated in our eyeline. Quietly, the goddess looked down at us.



Her overwhelming presence was incomparable to the other goddesses—no one had reacted this strongly to Ira, for example—and everyone was on their knees, practically holding their breath.

Ira was staring at me like I should be bowing as well. *Ehhh, I'm Noah's disciple, so I'm probably fine.* Ira then let out an exasperated sigh.

"Now then." Althena lifted her right hand.

What is she...?

Her intention soon became clear. Another summoning circle formed in front of her, and a man fell through, thumping heavily onto the floor. He was unconscious, but his identity was unmistakable.

Alexander!

The air was suddenly tense. Sasa and Furiae had especially strong reactions—their faces twisted angrily.

So he's still alive... I'll need to finish him off here.

I set *Calm Mind* to 100%, then muttered, "*Right Hand of the Elemental*." My preparations went far smoother than they had before.

"Wait," Ira said, grabbing my hand. "Have you taken leave of your senses?! If you attack Althena, she'll wipe you from the planet."

"But that guy attacked us!" I protested.

"W-Wait, my knight! I'm fine!" Even Furiae had run over and grabbed at my arm. Well, she was the one he'd targeted. If she was trying to stop me, I could hardly go against her wishes.

Gradually, the unconscious Hero of the Sun began to stir awake.

"Mgh..." he groaned. "What happ—" His mouth snapped shut when he met my eyes, and he began to scream and thrash around.

Huh...? He was super scared. Weird. He'd been playing the big man before.

"You becoming an elemental lord seems to have been a traumatic experience for him," Ira whispered into my ear.

"Elemental lord?" It wasn't a phrase I'd heard before. *Is that what happened when I transformed into an elemental?*

"Indeed. I'll explain later."

"You promise?" That sounded super strong! I was interested and wanted to know more.

Still on the ground, Alexander began pleading with Althena.

"H-Help me! He's going to kill me! He's going to—"

“Alec, quiet,” she said, cutting him off.

His words literally stopped there, like he physically couldn’t make another noise. I hadn’t seen her conjure a spell or magic circle—she’d just given the order and it had taken effect. *At least, I think that’s what happened...* Perhaps it’d been a miracle rather than a spell.

Silence and tension filled the air of the cathedral. Althena’s sharp gaze swept the area, and then she spoke.

“Alexander...is my brother.”

All of us let out gasps of shock, even Princess Noelle. The only one who didn’t seem shocked was Ira.

If you knew... I really wish you would’ve told me.

Perhaps Ira read my mind because she looked pointedly away.

That’s not cute, you know.

Regardless, there was something I absolutely had to ask. “You expect us to forgive what he did to Sasa and Princess because he’s your brother?” My eyes were set in a hard glare.

“Sir Makoto?!”

“Hero Makoto?!”

Princess Noelle and Princess Sophia both yelped, their faces pale. I didn’t care. I wanted to make things clear.

Althena seemed to pay my glare no more heed than she would a breeze. She spoke once more, her expression not changing in the slightest.

“I do. Forgive it.”

What?! What was with this *bitch*?!

“Mmph!” was all I managed as Ira slapped a hand over my mouth.

“Quiet down!” she hissed into my ear.

Urk! Ira (in Estelle’s body) is super strong!

Princess Noelle began to speak in my stead. “Lady Althena, I would like to humbly inquire about your brother. Why did he descend to our realm and become the Hero of the Sun? Also, why would he...”

This was a completely natural line of questioning since none of us could hazard a guess. Princess Noelle was her priestess, so Althena should explain, right?

But the goddess’s answer was cool. “You have no need to know,” she responded curtly.

Princess Noelle twitched, taking a moment to gather herself before

replying, “O-Of course. Very well.”

Come on, she’s not going to explain? It seemed odd that Furiae hadn’t said anything, but when I glanced to the side, it seemed like the situation as a whole had made her clam up. The same went for Lucy and Sasa.

Fine, then I’ll have to speak up... But Ira stopped me right away.

“Fool! Stop this,” she hissed. “Do you know how scary she’ll be if you make her angr—”

“Ira, silence.”

“Mmm! Mmm! Mmm!”

Ira could no longer speak—her voice had been reduced to muffled hums. Apparently, Althena had forbidden Ira from saying anything. *Did our whispered disagreement set her off? Althena really doesn’t have any mercy for her little sister.*

Well, if things were going to be this way, I’d take the humble position. For Ira.

“So, what do you want?” I asked.

That...had come out less humble than I’d intended. Still, Althena’s brother was the one who’d caused problems, so why should we all be so diffident?

“Mmm! Mmm! Mmm! Mmm! Mmm!”

Somehow, Ira had managed to make that understandable: “Idiot! Be polite! Don’t make her angry!” To be honest, it was pretty impressive that she was able to communicate so clearly despite the muffling.

“Makoto Takatsuki,” Althena said, looking my way.

Urk! It felt like there was a sword at my throat. Whew, scary.

“Wh-What is it?” I tried to maintain my resolve. We were the victims here, and I had to remain confident in that conviction.

“One of your comrades lost a life to Alec.”

“That’s right, she did. So—”

Althena cut me off. “It has been returned. Check the truth of it.” Her tone was nonchalant.

Sasa’s life had been returned? I turned to her. “Sasa?”

She hurriedly checked her Soul Book. “L-Look! *Extra Lives* is back up to five!”

“Oh...” So it was possible to reset that so simply?

“Thank you, Althena!” Sasa said cheerily.

“Of course.”

Was I the one being inconsiderate? I still blamed her brother for going crazy on us. For now, I’d keep quiet.

“Next,” she said, turning her gaze from me to Furiae. Startling, Furiae jumped and hid behind me.

“Moon priestess. This happened because of the cambions—they are ostracized on this continent.”

There was silence.

What the hell is that?! It sounds like she’s blaming the cambions for their own subjugation!

“Althena, when you say it like that—”

“Wait, my knight,” Furiae said, stopping me as I tried to complain.

“Mmm! Mmm!” Ira translation: “Right! Be quiet!”

No, you *be quiet.*

“Ira...just speak,” Althena said, apparently finding the muffled noise as annoying as I did.

“Phew... Finally.”

“Your sister’s scary,” I told her.

“I did say that, didn’t I?”

Althena glared at us.

“I...have a request, Althena,” Furiae said, stepping forward and kneeling. “I want a place...where the cambions can live in peace...”

Her petition sounded so earnest. Though I guess since she was speaking to the divine ruler of the world, she couldn’t exactly act all high and mighty. *I guess...*

Althena simply nodded. “Understood.”

Furiae’s hand tightened on mine. I squeezed back. Silence filled the room as everyone present waited for what Althena had to say.

“Furiae, Priestess of the Moon,” Althena stated gravely. “I would appoint you as a saint. You may gather the scattered cambions and found a new country.”

Saint? That would make her the second one on the continent, the other being Princess Noelle.

So far, in all of recorded history, there had only been two saints. The first had been Anna, the founder of Highland and a person of legend who’d defeated Iblis alongside Abel the Savior—she was also known as the first

pope of the church. The second was Princess Noelle, the first princess of Highland, Priestess of the Sun, and fiancée to the Hero of Light. She had recently taken and passed the trials to be considered a saint.

It was said that saints appeared in order to quell conflict during times of war. They were just as important as the Hero of Light. And now, Furiae had been chosen as the third one to ever exist.

"I'm...to be a saint?"

"Blood of both the cambions and the former royal family of Laphroaig runs through your veins," Ira explained. "Of course, you are free to decline."

"I thought you had to pass the trials to become a saint?" I asked. I was sure Fujiyan had mentioned that.

"Her guardian knight defeated a demigod—Alexander. A feat like that is equal to passing the trials," Ira answered.

Huh, so that was how things worked? I guess fighting against him hadn't been a waste after all.

Actually... Hang on...

"Ira, you claim that I won against Alexander...but Princess Sophia said I died. What's with that?"

"Ah... It's slightly complicated. I'll explain later."

"Also, what happened to Noah's dagger? I can't find it."

Ira scoffed. "Would you quit it with the questions? You're way too familiar with us."

"Ira, Makoto Takatsuki...be quiet," Althena said with a glare.

In unison, Ira and I both shut our mouths.

"So, Priestess of the Moon." Althena turned to Furiae. "What is your decision?"

"I..." Furiae trailed off before looking uneasily back at me.

"You should just do what you want," I said.

She nodded. "Then I will accept the duty."

"Very well." Althena placed her hand on Furiae's head. For a moment, Furiae's body was shining, cloaked in a rainbow of light. "I have given you my blessing. You may now call yourself Furiae, the Saint of Miracles."

Whoo! Furiae was a saint! Wait, did that mean she was no longer a priestess? Was I still her guardian knight?

"Yes, Makoto Takatsuki," Althena answered. "Your contract remains.

Being a saint does not preclude being a priestess."

"Huh."

Just in case, I checked my Soul Book—it still said I was her guardian knight. I glanced at Furiae, and it almost seemed...like she was glowing.

"Congrats, Princess. Oh, Saint, I guess."

"You can still call me Princess... Actually, you... Could you call me Furiae?" she asked almost shyly, looking up at me.

"I'll just stick with Princess." I decided it'd be weird to change how I addressed her out of nowhere.

"I see. However! You are still my knight! You aren't allowed to run away!"

"Got it." I wouldn't have run regardless.

Althena looked over all of us. "Noelle, I leave the official matters to you. You are ordered to take up the pope's role. He will be held responsible for this indiscretion and removed from his post. If there are complications, Ira will handle them. Is that clear, Ira?"

Princess Noelle nodded. "V-Very well, I understand."

"Urgh..." Ira grumbled at my side.

"Noelle, Furiae, you are to work together as saints. I want to see Iblis dealt with."

There was a long pause as the sun and moon priestesses exchanged meaningful looks. Then, they both nodded.

"Very well."

"Understood."

Those two clash like a cat and a dog usually...but I guess it'll be fine...?

"Finally... Ryousuke Sakurai."

"Y-Yes?!"

Althena approached him. "My apologies for Alec. I shall take care of him. *You* are the one who is destined to defeat Iblis. I expect much from you."

"I appreciate your words," Sakurai said with a respectful bow of his head.

Althena's face was the softest I'd seen it. It seemed...like she was only being *nice* to him?

"Farewell," she said. In an instant, she disappeared along with Alexander.

She's gone...

Things were a bit crazy after that. People flocked to my side when they heard that I'd come back from the dead. (If that was what'd actually happened... I still wasn't sure.)

"Makoto..." Prince Leonardo wept, holding on to me for quite a while. Fujiyan and Nina cried too, and the two Ballantine siblings also stopped by. General Talisker, Maximilian, and Florna, the Priestess of Wood—all of them wanted to see me. The Grandsage...didn't visit. *Maybe I should have gone to her.* I felt kinda sad that she was absent.

After apologizing to everyone for worrying them, I was now ready to get some magic practice in. However...

"No training today, Makoto!" Lucy insisted. Her words seemed to start an avalanche of protests from my other companions.

"Takatsuki...you need to rest."

"My knight, everyone is worried about you. Just stop."

"Hero Makoto, at least take a break for today."

Sasa, Furiae...and even Princess Sophia joined in to stop me.

I sighed, feeling resigned. "Okay..."

Guess I'll get some shut-eye. I flopped down onto the bed. I must have been more tired than I thought since I soon felt my consciousness fading.

◇

I awoke in nothingness, in a place that was completely empty—this was my goddess's space.

Well, it makes sense that she'd summon me today...

After all, I was her only disciple, and I'd technically died. *I imagine she must be rather angry.* Yet, when I looked around for her, what I saw was...a rather strange sight.

Hmm?

Noah was indeed there, her arms unhappily crossed. That was fine. I could see Eir as well, which was normal too. Then there was Ira. Her being here wasn't odd, but for some reason...she was on her knees. She knelt on the ground, slumping forward, and I couldn't see her face.

Finally, I noticed another figure. She stood taller than the rest and

loomed over Ira, her arms crossed just like Noah's.

Huh, so Althena is here too?

Maybe she was angry about how I'd behaved today... I had been pretty blunt. Slowly, I made my way over to the group. It took quite a bit of courage to join a gathering of four goddesses.

"Oh, you're here," Althena said, turning to look at me. Her expression was completely different than it'd been in the cathedral. She actually seemed rather awkward. "I have business with you, Makoto Takatsuki." She approached, not meeting my eyes.

Where did that merciless look from earlier go? Her demeanor's changed so much from earlier. What's going on...?

I braced myself, waiting for her to continue. Then, finally...

"My apologies," she murmured, bowing her head.

I froze in shock. "Wha—?"

"Althena?!" Eir exclaimed, seeming just as stunned.

"My, that was nicely said," Noah added. Even her voice held a tinge of surprise.

Althena then glared down at Ira, and when she spoke, her voice was hard. "You have something to say as well, no?"

Ira rose like a zombie and slowly turned to face me.

"I ovver my deebest abologies... Ihm a wordless guhddess..."

"I-Ira?!" I sputtered.

She'd been crying and kneeling...for *me*?! Wh-What the?! Help! Noah, help!

"Well, Alexander's rampage was her fault."

"Haah..." *Seriously, what's going on?*

"Allow me to explain!" Eir said, flouncing her way over. She snapped her fingers and a whiteboard appeared, floating in midair.

"Today's lecture will be about... Bam! Alec!"

I noticed that Eir was now dressed like a teacher—glasses, a white shirt, and a black skirt. She was pretty well-endowed, so the tight shirt showed off *all* of her lines. It was pretty hot. Noah had once worn the same outfit, but the two goddesses gave off *very* different impressions. One of Fujiyan's waifu games had a character like that...

"Makoto..." Noah's voice was sharp. "What do you mean Eir's hotter than me?"

“I didn’t think that!” *This is slander!*

“To cut things short,” Althena interrupted, “we goddesses only found out about Alexander recently.”

What? But Ira had known about him, hadn’t she...? Also, he was Highland’s State-Authorized Hero, right?

“Irrie didn’t say anything. To us, I mean,” Eir explained. She wrote “Alec (Secret)” on the board.

“We were careless,” Althena said. “To think, father descended to the mortal realm to have children...”

She seemed exasperated, like she was at her wit’s end. Wasn’t he some womanizer who wasn’t happy with his thousand-odd wives? Oh, and didn’t he still want Noah?

“Right, right, that sex demon has a child roughly every fifty years or so,” Noah said harshly.

Sex-demon? *Really?*

“He hasn’t been that bad recently!” Althena protested. “Or...that’s what I thought. Sex-addled fool!”

“A-Althena?!” *You’re losing yourself a bit!*

My interjection pulled a grunt from her. She cleared her throat.

“And that’s the problem, Mako. How old do you think Alec is?” Eir asked.

“Huh? How old?”

Well, he was pretty tall and fairly muscular. Judging from his appearance, probably...midtwenties? Though, with how this conversation was going, I suspected that he was deceptively young. *Maybe thirteen or fourteen? Younger than me?*

“Around thirteen?” I asked, leaning on the lower side of my estimate.

Eir giggled, giving me a meaningful look as she adjusted her glasses. That was the same move Noah had once pulled...but Eir showed off her chest a bit. Flirty indeed.

“The answer iiiis...one year old! Too bad, Mako!”

I sighed. “Oh, so he’s one— Wait, what?! Only a year old?!”

Hold on. The dude’s built like a brick shithouse! He’s like two meters tall! How is he only a year old?! Is he living on a weird time scale, like “one year in the divine realm is ten for the mortals” or something?

Noah shook her head. “Nope. When Eir calls him a year old, she’s

saying that a year on the mortal plane has passed since he was born."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa—that's gotta be a joke, right?" He spoke really well and was ridiculously strong. And, during our fight, he'd used a whole bunch of magic. What did being a year old even mean anymore?

While I was busy reeling, Eir wrote "Alec (1 y/o)" on the board. But putting it like that made him sound like some adorable kid. In reality, he was seriously grumpy.

"His rapid aging is due to him being a demigod with the blood of the Godking in his veins," Althena said with a pained expression. "In a year, demigods can grow tremendously...in a physical sense. However, without enough time spent learning, they lack understanding of normal behavior. Of course, what happened should not be allowed, however..."

"Irrie here dealt with his education," Eir trilled.

Ira groaned as she slumped forward again.

I thought back to when we'd first met Alec. He'd tried to come for Furiae back then too, but Estelle (or Ira in Estelle's body) had commanded him to stop, and he'd obeyed her.

"If that was the case, then surely his education was perfect, right?" With Ira raising him personally, he should've been fine. She was a goddess after all.

"Sure, but that's the problem..." Noah said. "Ira let a human take on his guardianship partway through."

"It was because he started acting rebellious! He wouldn't listen to a word I said!" Ira exclaimed. "But then, the pope was soft on him, so they went full-on grandpa/grandson! I figured that, divine blood or not, he was already a year old, so it'd be fine..."

"Nope, *one* isn't old enough," Eir said, writing "Ira (X)" on the board.

We should add several more Xs. At least that explained why Ira was on her knees—she was essentially the one who'd caused all of this by not raising him properly. Man, what a pain.

"Ira, why did you not tell the other goddesses about him?" I asked.

"I thought they might be against him if they found out. But I wanted to be in the best position possible against Iblis..."

Ira then laid out her reasoning. A thousand years ago, back when the demons ruled the continent, faith in the Sacred Deities had waned. Mortals, having grown disillusioned with the gods, had lost their faith. Ira explained

that she didn't want to go through that again...or anything similar.

Using her knowledge of the future, Ira predicted that humanity's defenders had about a fifty percent chance of winning against the Great Demon Lord. She'd searched for all kinds of ways to improve our odds but hadn't found anything decisive. She'd been frantic, combing every inch of the land and using Estelle to seek out useful people.

And then, she'd found him—her father's secret child.

"As soon as I saw him, I was sure he was the answer!"

It made sense that the supreme god who ruled the world would have hidden his conquests well. He could visit his lovers, and nobody—not Althena, the other goddesses, or any other divinities—would be any the wiser.

"So Irrie brought him up as the Hero of the Sun," Eir concluded.

"Why the Hero of the Sun?" I asked. "Couldn't he have been Cameron's __"

Ira cut me off. "No. Cameron gaining such a powerful hero out of nowhere would have destroyed the balance of the six nations. The western continent is at peace with Highland at its core. Having two countries of a similar strength like that would only lead to war."

"I see..."

As a goddess, I guess it made sense that she would consider these factors. She had to balance the fate of everyone on the continent, not just her own faithful. Regardless, she'd still messed up big time...

"I thought that if the Hero of Light won against Iblis, we could just take Alec back to the divine realm. But if he *lost*, I wanted Alec as a hero in reserve..."

"Well, as far as it sounds, the plan was pretty well thought out," I offered. Alec's demigod strength had taken out Sakurai in a single strike, so he should be just as useful against Iblis. I'd experienced his power firsthand.

"Well, Ira's lack of supervision led to it all falling apart," Noah said into my ear. She was still holding on to me, and her breath tickled my skin. Why did it smell so sweet? Still, she didn't *seem* to be in a bad mood...hopefully.

Althena, though, wore a definite frown on her face.

"The situation is dire. The Daemons will consider this to be interference by the Sacred Deities, so there is now a chance that they will also try to

interfere. Actually, the other gods could be a problem too...”

“Can’t we say that it was to stop the elemental weapon?” asked Eir. “The Daemons surely see it as a threat.”

“Indeed... But they will not accept that excuse.”

“Elemental weapon?” I blurted out, despite how serious Eir and Althena’s conversation sounded. Was that different from the elemental lord Ira had mentioned?

Eir shook her head. “They’re the same thing, Mako. An elemental weapon...an elemental lord... That is what you became.”

“I’m...an elemental weapon?” Had I really used such an extreme spell?

“The Titanea’s believers sacrificed themselves to become beings capable of controlling all elementals,” Althena explained. “The mortals call them elemental lords.”

“By the way, bringing them back is against divine law, so when they’re found, they’re immediately destroyed... But we brought you back specially, Mako!” Eir cheered, cute as ever.

No. There’s nothing cute about that. I’ve gone down a pretty risky path...

“Well, even Noah seemed blindsided by it this time. Isn’t that right?”

“Of course I was! Makoto’s my only believer! If I lost him, I’d be back to zero!”

“She was in a right tizzy when you did it,” Eir said.

My goddess was still clinging to me, and I murmured, “Sorry, Noah.” I couldn’t see her expression, but I was pretty sure it would be an angry one. Slowly, I turned to look.

My breath caught in my throat.

Her clear eyes were fixed on me. That smile was the same as ever—kind, like someone watching a clumsy child. A smile full of love.

Ah...she’s gorgeous. How can someone be so beautiful? But...

“N-Noah?”

Why did I stutter?

“Say...Makoto.” Her voice was loving, with absolutely no hint of anger.

I forgot to breathe. I couldn’t even blink, and I hesitated to move a finger. I felt as if I was a deer in headlights—my body petrified like stone.

Quietly, gently, lovingly, her voice caressed my ear in a whisper. “Do you remember the first promise you made after you became my believer?”

Crap... She was *super* mad.

Her smile was brilliant, without a single shadow cast over it. As her hands rested on my shoulders, I could still feel her breath on me. I didn't have the time to get nervous though—in my mind, memories from a year ago played out.

Back then... That first promise...

"You're the only believer I have, so you'd better not die that easily! I have high hopes for you."

Shit.

I'd well and truly disregarded that vow.

"Hmm, it looks like you do remember," she said.

"Y-Yeah..."

She rested her pale hand on my cheek. Her beautiful features drew in closer, and she whispered right in my ear. "You really broke your promise, didn't you? Naughty boy."

The sweetness in her voice sent a shiver down my spine. I gulped.

"Naughty boys get punished, don't they?"

Her tone, her eyes, and even her hand as she stroked my cheek were all gentle. Too gentle... It was scary.

"That's what we call 'abuse of power.'"

"So that's how she manipulates her believers..."

"Piling on the pressure with charm as always, I see."

I could hear Eir, Ira, and Althena commenting from behind me.

"Quiet in the audience!" Noah snapped.

"No, there is something that must be said," Althena countered, moving closer. "Noah, the fault lay with Olympus this time, so we allowed Makoto Takatsuki's resurrection, but...there will not be a next time. There will be no arguing—he will simply be destroyed. A 'warning' is not enough. You must deal with your disciple properly."

With that, Althena's fierce, authoritative look was back. So, Noah telling me off...wasn't going to be the end of it.

"I know, Althena," she sighed. "Makoto, look me in the eye."

"R-Right."

Both her hands grabbed hold of my shoulders. My gaze was trapped by her ocean-colored eyes.

“In the name of Noah, I command thee,” she said gravely. I gulped. “No full-elementalification! Ever☆!”

Then, with that easygoing statement, she bumped her head into mine. A moment later...

“Gah!”

It felt like my body was being bound up by something I couldn’t see.

No, it wasn’t just my body—these restraints were piercing my mind. It was like I was being stabbed all over. Sweat poured off me; my balance faltered. I couldn’t even stay standing, so I put my hands on the floor. My vision flickered, spinning. *How do I breathe?* Bile rose in my throat, almost as though my insides were being minced.

Then, gradually, the feeling eased.

“N-Noah?” I gasped, looking up at her for an explanation.

I wanted to hold on to something, and I found myself clinging to her leg. She looked down at me with a smile—that same loving smile as always.

“That was a Divine Edict. You can’t become the elemental lord of water anymore. I ordered your soul not to let you.”

My head was still spinning a bit, but I could understand. This was what it felt like when a goddess gave an *order* to her disciple. It was...intense. I couldn’t even consider using the spell like that again—there was no way I could break her edict.

“That should be enough, right, Althena?”

“Yes, it will be.”

Judging by their short conversation, Althena was satisfied.

“Besides, Noah, that elemental magic skill you created is broken,” said Ira. “Why would you allow it to be trained without an upper limit? We cap skills at a thousand mastery for a reason.”

“Eh, it’s all good. I think people should be rewarded for the effort they put in.”

“But the excess power will destroy the user...”

“You’re so stubborn, Ira! Aren’t you supposed to be young?”

As they had their little argument, a detail caught my attention.

“Goddesses create each skill?” I asked. I hadn’t known that.

“Yes, we create them and imbue mortals with their power,” Althena replied. “However, a strong skill takes a longer time to craft. The *Hero of Light* skill, for example, took a thousand years.”

“A thousand years?!” I couldn’t help but yell. If that was true, then it made sense that no one had been born with it since Abel. Princess Noelle had talked about bloodlines carrying skills...but that had nothing to do with it. *Maybe I should tell her at some point.*

That brought up another question though.

“If it’s so rare, then why does *Sakurai* have it?” It took a thousand years to create, so surely Althena could’ve given it to someone already on the continent rather than an otherworlder.

There was a long pause, then...

“Who knows...?” she muttered.

Hm? Althena had answered everything else really clearly, but now she was being vague. The reason must have been super complicated.

“Come on, Althena, don’t play it up—you just like his looks, don’t you?”

“Hey! Noah!” Althena protested.

My eyes widened. “Huh? That’s why?” The truth was shocking.

“She has always put too much stock in looks,” Noah said. “Well, her first love fell for me, so— Ow! What’re you doing?!”

“Enough, Noah! I have a mind to increase your sentence!”

“Hah! Just try it! A few more years won’t change a thing at this point!”

“You always have to have the last word!”

Noah and Althena just kept bickering, but it wasn’t a hostile fight. *I don’t get it... I thought they were bitter enemies.*

“Noah and Althena are childhood friends,” Eir said.

“What?! They are?”

“Yup. Noah is the youngest of the old gods and Althena is the oldest of the new gods, so they were born at roughly the same time.”

“H-Huh...”

How long ago must that have been? Just how old were they...? Wait, I’d better not bring that up. Scary.

“Noah sided with the bad guys in the war a thousand years ago, and Althena started sulking, so they haven’t talked for a while, but they made up today.”

“Okay...” That kind of patience was honestly...crazy. Who holds a grudge for a whole millennium?

Midway through their fight, the goddesses had started running around

faster than my eye could follow. Now, they came back over to us, breathing heavily. Noah stood for a moment, panting, then seemed to remember something.

"Oh, right. Eir, give the dagger back to him."

I jumped. *Eir has Noah's dagger?!*

"Whoopsie! Here you go, Mako."

I let out a sigh. The dagger, which still glowed blue, was back in my possession. *Thank goodness... Thought I'd never see it again.*

"By the way, where'd you find it?" I asked. My fight with the Hero of the Sun was a blank spot in my memory. I'd probably dropped it while battling him.

Eir awkwardly avoided my gaze. "Hmm, well, it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Ah, Eir was the one to stop you after you defeated Alec," Ira said.

Huh. So I'd *defeated* Alec. But wait... According to Princess Sophia, I'd been dead. If I had won, how could that be true? It didn't make sense.

Ira nonchalantly put my confusion to rest. "When you became the weapon, Eir killed you."

I was stunned into a long silence. Finally, I took a double take at Eir in her teacher's getup. "Huh?"

"Sorry, Mako, I took you out☆" She giggled and stuck out her tongue at me. Though, she did seem a bit embarrassed that I knew the truth.

Cute...and utterly terrifying. No, really—that's scary!

I backed away instinctively.

"H-Hey! Don't look at me like that. You were in the sea at the time, so that's my domain... I wasn't happy about the decision either! I didn't want to mess with Sophie's crush!" Eir stepped in closer. "Besides, we brought you back right away, so please forgive meeee☆ We're all friends now! Coochiecoochiecooooo..."

"E-Eir..."

In order to distract me from my panic, she'd wrapped her arms around my body, pressing her marshmallowy chest into me. I felt my mind growing distant. *So soft...*

"There we go, Mako. There, there. Good boy." She stroked my head like I was a child, and I buried my face in her soft chest. "Yuuuup, mama's here."

I couldn't manage a retort—I felt myself almost waking up.

"You're charming him!" Noah yelled. Suddenly, she launched herself at Eir, striking her with a flying kick.

Th-That was close. Charm *magic* might not faze me...but direct attacks like that worked well on virgins...

"Ma. Ko. To?" Noah angrily pulled Eir off me and then squeezed me in a hug of her own. "You're such a naughty boy! You shouldn't be ogling other goddesses!"

"No, I wasn't..." Unlike Eir, Noah was relatively slender, but she had much more of her skin on show.

"How are you so calm?" Ira asked, shocked. "Two goddesses hugged you...and you barely reacted!"

"Huh? I'm not calm at all."

"And yet you're holding a conversation. Normally, people would completely lose their cool... Oh well. I guess, considering everything that's happened, I should do something *nice* for you as thanks."

"I-Ira?!"

"You don't have much experience with women, do you? Tee hee, I'll teach you! Be grateful!" Her demanding tone was rather rude. Slowly, she came closer.

"Ira?! What are you saying?!" Noah exclaimed.

Eir shook her head. "Irrie, you can't be so casual about these things."

"I don't want to hear that from either of you... Come on, Makoto Takatsuki! Over here."

"No! He's mine!" Noah insisted, tightening her grip.

Ugh...can't...breathe... It felt like I was a toy they were tossing around.

Then, suddenly, my vision started to blur.

"Makoto, it's time," said Noah.

It sure seemed that way. I knelt, then bowed my head to the four goddesses. "Got it. I'm sorry for worrying you, Noah. Althena, Eir, Ira, thank you all for talking to me."

"Makoto Takatsuki, if something bothers you, then push it all onto Ira," said Althena.

Merciless...

Ira slumped. "Urgh..."

"S-Sure," I answered.

“Bye, Mako,” Eir said with her usual smile.

When I looked at Noah, she seemed to be wearing a slightly more somber expression than usual.

And just like that, my consciousness faded away.

◇ Lucy’s Perspective ◇

I woke up to sunlight streaming in through the window. *Guess I overslept...*

I’d barely gotten any rest until yesterday because I’d been spending all my time training. But now that Makoto was back, the relief must’ve gotten to me.

Well, whatever. Let’s go see Makoto!

I got out of bed, dealt with my hair, and washed my face in the mirror. Then, I quietly slipped into Makoto’s room.

His bed was empty.

“He’s not even here?!”

For pity’s sake, he must already be training.

I sighed and headed down the stairs. In the kitchen, someone was humming cheerily. My nose was soon greeted with the smell of freshly baked bread. I could hear a pot of soup bubbling heartily on the stove, and ham was sizzling in a pan.

I stepped into the room and saw a girl standing at the counter wearing a pink apron.

“Morning, Aya.”

She offered me a wide smile “Morning, Lu!”

The whole inn had been booked, and we supplied our own food. Though Aya was a hero, she was still doing the housework.

“Have you seen Makoto?” I asked.

“He said he was going to train in the garden.”

I scoffed. “He *should* be resting... You seem like you’re in a good mood, though.” I never would have guessed that she’d been crying nonstop until yesterday. It wasn’t like I had much room to talk—I’d felt much the same.

She giggled. “Well, Takatsuki told me, ‘Don’t push yourself. I’ll always be with you.’ Ahhhh!”

“H-Huh.” He came out with some pretty good lines sometimes. I wonder

if he'd offer me one too.

"So I said it too!" she continued. "I told him, 'We'll *always* be together. I'll *never* let you go!' And then he said okay!" She gave me a cute grin.

She *was* adorable, but...those words seemed awfully heavy. Was I imagining things?

"The food'll be done soon. Go get Takatsuki and Fuu, would you?"

"Sure." I waved at her before heading off to the garden and to Makoto.

As I went to step outside, I saw someone—the moon priestess, sitting vacantly on the sofa in the dining room. Oh, wait, she was a *saint* now, right? Her looks hadn't really changed, but she seemed to have some kind of holy aura.

And she—the most beautiful girl in the world—was currently sitting like someone had sucked her soul out.

"Morning, Fuuri," I said.

A beat of silence passed, and then she jumped.

"M-Mage?!" she sputtered, staring at me.

"You okay?"

"I am. Just...yesterday was too much. I'm overwhelmed."

"That makes sense."

It wasn't much of a surprise. A few days ago, the Hero of the Sun had suddenly attacked her. Makoto had driven him off but had also vanished and...died. The whole party, myself included, had fallen to despair. Then, suddenly, he'd come back.

And on top of that, Fuuri had gone from being a priestess to holding the rank of saint. No wonder she was exhausted.

"Aya said the food's nearly done."

"Thank you... I don't feel hungry, but I'll eat."

"That's right! You have to eat properly! Stamina is everything for an adventurer! Although, you're going to organize a whole country, aren't you? Maybe you won't be able to keep up adventuring."

"Who knows..." she mused.

That sigh was kinda alluring. I was a girl, and I still found my heart racing.

"I'm going to go get Makoto now—want to come along?"

"T-To see my knight?!" She flapped around, her face bright red.

I didn't *think* I'd said anything weird...

“He’s just healed up—well, come back from the dead—and he’s already started training again. We need to scold him and tell him to take it easy.” I grabbed her arm and began tugging her along with me.

“W-Wait! Wait, mage! I’m not ready!”

“You don’t wanna collect him from the garden?”

“I-I’ll pass!”

“Okay...?”

Well, with no other choice, I headed out to the back garden alone. Before I got there, I turned to look at Fuuri.

“I-I wonder if my face is red,” she muttered to herself, blushing furiously and putting her hands over her cheeks.

Ahh, she fell for him...

I sighed and strode out to the garden. There was a small river flowing through it, and Makoto was sitting cross-legged in front of it with his back to me. I stepped over to him, waving.

“Makoto! It’s break...time...”

Huh? What’s that?

I saw something new—a blue fish, gleaming and swimming through the sky. It was only around the size of my pinky finger. Makoto must have made it with his water magic, but...

“Wow. It’s tiny, but he even sculpted the scales and fins. And it’s moving almost like it’s alive...”

It wasn’t just one either. Hundreds of little blue fish were swirling in a complicated dance in front of me.

“Huh...?”

Something else flitted past me. Many somethings... Hundreds of butterflies, all made of water. Their wings and transparent bodies were moving just like the real thing.

At that point, I felt a trace amount of mana above me.

It wasn’t an attack spell. This much mana could never hurt anyone. But there were so many water creatures... *So* many...

How is this possible...? What’s going on?!

These creations filled the sky. And each one of them was practically a carbon copy of a real animal. I tried to touch one, but it vanished. Since I have a lot of fire magic mana, it must have clashed and broken against Makoto’s water magic. *Which means...*

This had to be *his* spell.

He was controlling all of them. Tens of thousands of creatures.

They glittered in the sunlight, seeming almost ethereal. I was a mage though, so I found myself shivering at the absurd number of active spells. My gaze fell upon my lover, horrified.

Makoto was just happily playing with Twi. *He looks so at ease... But he's controlling all of these creatures!* Impossible... What was going on?

I made my way through the swarm of water animals and came to stand at his side.

"Morning, Makoto!"

"Morning, Lucy," he said. He must have already noticed me because he didn't jump when I spoke up from behind him.

"So...these spells are yours, right?" I asked, pointing at the creatures in the sky.

"Yeah. Pretty, aren't they?"

"That's not what I'm talking about! Just look at how *many* there are! What in the world is this?!"

"I just feel really good."

"It's weird! Did you get some special skill or something?!"

"Skill? Hmm, Althena and Ira didn't say anything..."

"Althena? Ira?" Those were the goddesses we'd met yesterday—they'd been utterly overwhelming. I felt myself shaking just remembering it.

"Well, maybe Ira forgot to explain. She's kinda clumsy. Althena's surprisingly friendly though."

"Y-Y'know, you shouldn't be talking about them like that!" The things he was spouting were horrifying. Did he even know what would happen if their believers overheard him?!

"It's fine. They're both nice. I'll just check my Soul Book..."

"How are you so easygoing about this..."

As I spoke, Makoto pulled out his Soul Book. I hugged him from behind, reading it over his shoulder.

I couldn't see any new skills.

"See, nothing's changed," he said.

"Hmm, right..."

But then, I noticed. My eyes went wide.

"Huh?"

“What’s up, Lucy?”

I heard his voice, but I couldn’t respond.

Written in his Soul Book was a single line.

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Water Magic Mastery: 999
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Wh-What in the world?!

Chapter 6 — Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with a Saint

Lucy and I had been busy raving about what we'd found in my Soul Book when Sasa came out to the garden and yelled for us to hurry up.

Guess we can properly look into the whole 999 mastery thing later.

Once we'd all gathered to eat, we offered a chorus of "Thank you!" and tucked in to breakfast. Sasa had made toast and a clear soup, along with a ham and egg salad. It was Western food, but in a style that you could expect to see on a Japanese dining table. I piled some ham and egg salad onto my toast and added a bit of mayonnaise on top—that particular condiment had come from Fujiyan's store.

As I munched away on my makeshift sandwich, I shared the content of my dream with my friends.

"Althena's actually a pretty good person. I feel sorry for Ira though."

"Huh... So Ira is *that* kind of goddess?" Lucy asked. "It's...kind of a shock."

Furiae just vacantly listened to our conversation.

"Princess?" I asked.

"Wh-What is it?"

"You feeling all right?"

"Of course I am!"

If she says so... She wasn't really eating much.

Either way, we finished breakfast and then poured ourselves cups of tea. But suddenly, I heard footsteps approaching. A *lot* of footsteps. Had we invited guests?

"Hero Makoto! Furiae! Are you there?!"

Princess Sophia and her guards barged in—Fujiyan was with them. And also...Estelle?

"Good morning, Princess Sophia. Is something the matter?"

"Good morning, Hero Makoto. I see Furiae is here as well." She walked

over to us, her expression severe.

"Wh-What is it?" Furiae asked, shifting.

"The cambions of Highland—no, of the *whole* continent—want to meet Saint Furiae."

"Wha...?"

It wasn't just Furiae who responded. Lucy, Sasa, and I were all dumbstruck too.

"What actually happened?" Furiae asked, clearly confused.

"It seems that the Goddess of Fortune appeared in the cambions' dreams, foretelling that you would create a country for them!" Fujiyan explained. "Thus, the cambions have come to gather before you..."

"*Ira* did that?"

I glanced suspiciously at Estelle, who was hanging behind everyone else. She immediately looked away.

"Ira? Would you mind explaining?" I asked.

Everyone whipped around to stare at me, looking taken aback.

"Hero Makoto, what do you mean?" asked Princess Sophia. "This is Estelle..."

I kept my eyes trained on "Estelle" and said, "Iraaaa? Look me in the eye, would you? I'll tell Althena."

"Don't!" Estelle shouted, jumping at me.

See, I knew *it was Ira!*

"So? What'd you mess up this time?"

"I messed up nothing! Now that Furiae is a saint, she will need a workforce to create this country, won't she? So, I just let the cambions know about the plan...using their dreams! But now there're loads of them gathering here."

"You truly are Lady Ira?!" Princess Sophia asked. She and her guards' faces all stiffened in shock. Well, yeah... A goddess descending to the mortal plane wasn't usually treated so casually.

"Isn't this a bit sudden, though? Shouldn't we have been able to prepare first—"

Ira interrupted me. "How can you suggest such a slow reaction, Makoto Takatsuki? Iblis will return tomorrow! And when the state of emergency is announced, people will find it difficult to travel. This was the best timing."

"Tomorrow?!" everyone shouted.

Ira, why didn't you tell any of them something so important?!

"O-Oh? Did I not already say?"

Damn this useless goddess. Still, despite not knowing the exact timing, everyone *had* known that Iblis was going to be back within the next few days. Hopefully, we should all be ready to fight.

"Princess, you good?" I asked, turning to Furiae.

"Wha?! Uh... Yeah, I'm...fine..."

"But you look kinda red...?" I said, half asking and half observing. I peered at her flushed face. *The barrage of information must have overheated her.*

"I-I'm fine! It's just...you're kinda close."

"Do you have a fever or something?"

I placed my hand on her forehead. She gave a little "eep."

Yeah, she feels kind of warm.

"All right, Fuu. Time to calm down," Sasa said, coming over and patting her shoulder.

"Makoto, you need to back off," Lucy insisted. She grabbed me and forcibly yanked me away.

Hey! I was worried about her...

"Leave the cambions to Cameron!" Ira exclaimed. "We have a temporary housing area outside of Symphonia. Cameron will also provide meals."

"Oh, so you're ready for this," I remarked.

Ira—in Estelle's body—puffed out her meager chest. Turning to Furiae, she continued. "Check with those who've gathered and find the people you need to create this country. We will ensure there is somewhere you can interview them in turn."

"Y-You want me to...?"

"You cannot build a country alone. Cameron will provide aid, so you must arrange for the personnel."

"U-Understood. I'll try to do so." Despite her uneasiness, Furiae's nod of agreement was strong and firm.

Well, I'd have to help too...somehow.

"Fujiyan, you mind backing her up too?" I asked.

"Hm? Ah, I see. Of course, my friend," Fujiyan answered, immediately cottoning on to my idea. Everyone gathering around Furiae would have

their own motives—Fujiyan would be able to use his *Mind Reading* to see who we could trust.

"Princess, do you mind if Fujiyan lends a hand?"

"I don't...but what about you, my knight?"

"I'll be helping too, of course."

"I see. Then that's fine." Her expression gradually calmed down.

Princess Sophia nodded at our course of action. "As the situation continues to develop...I will also offer whatever aid I can."

"I wonder if there's anything we can do," Lucy pondered aloud.

"There definitely will be," Sasa replied. "Fuu, if you need anything at all, just let us know!"

And so, all together, we headed to where the cambions were gathered.

That evening, we convened in the living room.

"I am exhausted, my knight..."

Sasa sighed heavily. "Maybe we should order food tonight..."

"Good for you, Fuuri. You're really popular..." Lucy mumbled.

All three of them were slumped over.

Princess Sophia looked at me worriedly. "Everyone seems dead on their feet."

"Well, they were all so busy..."

Just today, we'd interviewed over a hundred cambion candidates. Lucy had checked the mages' capabilities, and Sasa had sparred with the fighters. Fujiyan had done the final checks on their personalities, and finally, they'd been allowed to speak to Furiae.

Already, over a thousand cambions had put their names in the hat, and Furiae had only personally interviewed the particularly exceptional people—the average ones had been recorded and registered by Princess Sophia and Estelle's subordinates. For now, the focus was on individuals with experience in either engineering or farming. Laphroaig was home to a lot of monsters, so fighters were important as well. Luckily, since cambions were often mages, there wouldn't be too much concern in regard to defense.

Princess Sophia, Fujiyan, and the others had briskly solved all of those concerns. As for me? Well, I'd stayed by Furiae's side, serving the candidates tea and such.

"Now that we've screened applicants, I have an appointment to see

Princess Noelle," Princess Sophia said. She held my hand longingly, and I squeezed it back.

"Thanks, Sophia."

"If you truly think that, then show it a little more." She pouted and pinched my cheek.

Uhh, what do I do here? I know! If in doubt, hug it out! She yelped adorably as I put my arms around her.

"You're not fair," she complained, but her expression softened. A hug had definitely been the right answer.

Not bad, Mako, Eir told me.

So she was watching... The ominous silence around me implied that so were Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae.

I tried to just avoid looking their way, but that was never going to work.

The hour grew late, and I was training in my room. Tomorrow...Iblis would finally return. It would be the most historic event since our arrival in this world—something we'd been told about over and over. In a way, it was actually rather exciting.

Now then, it was time to train! I had to be ready!

That's just what you always do, Noah commented.

Well, that's the most important thing, right? She and I chatted mentally for a while, but we were interrupted by a knock at the door. It was probably Lucy coming to train alongside me, or maybe Sasa coming to talk. Either way, I'd pretty much expected one of them.

"Come in," I called.

"O-Okay..."

My expectations had been wrong. Instead of either Sasa or Lucy, it was Saint Furiae, in her bedclothes, who appeared in my doorway.

"Um, do you have a moment?" she asked.

She was wearing a purple...something. *I think it's called a negligee?* Furiae stepped into my room, the erotic bed clothes swishing as she moved.

"Yeah, 'course," I managed, despite being taken aback by the different impression she was giving off right now. I gestured to a chair, but she sat on my bed instead. Why there? Did she need to discuss something serious?

When Lucy or Sasa turned up, I usually kept training while we talked, but...in the end, I decided to stop my practice. I sat in a chair and faced her,

ready for the conversation.

She didn't say anything for a while.

"Princess?" I prompted. However, before I could ask what she wanted...

"Next to me!" she blurted out, patting the bed at her side.

"G-Got it."

I moved as I spoke, sitting at her side and peering at her. She wouldn't meet my gaze, but she definitely seemed like she was trying to work up the nerve to say something.

Was the topic hard for her to bring up? Maybe she wanted to leave the party so she could found the country as its saint. If she wanted to focus on that, then I was going to help her.

Oh, but I'd also made a promise to Sakurai—I was going to help him fight Iblis. *In that case, Furiae and I might end up parting ways.* Also, I personally wanted to be part of the final battle. I was thinking over how I'd deal with everything as I waited for her to start speaking.

I could faintly hear the noise of the city in the distance. Symphonia was an active city, right into the night. Yet things were quiet in my room.

"U-Um, my knight!" Furiae finally broke the silence, grabbing my hand and turning to face me.

"Yup?"

She looked so serious... What on earth could she want to talk about?

"Um...when you saved me from the Hero of the Sun...I really appreciated that."

"Huh? Ah...you're welcome." She wanted to talk about *that*? I was sure she'd wanted to talk about the future.

"I...was so happy. My *Charm Magic* doesn't work on you...but you still risked your life for me..."

"I didn't expect to actually die though..." I sighed, remembering Noah's harsh scolding.

"Say, my knight?"

"Y-Yeah?" I asked, shaking off my regrets and facing her again.

"You have done so much for me. You saved me from Highland, you've taken me to so many different countries, you rescued me from the Hero of the Sun, and you even helped me become a saint."

"Hmm...yeah." That last point was more because of Althena, but I decided not to say anything. "I got the *Charm* skill from becoming your

guardian knight, so we're even, right?"

"That's not enough—it doesn't make us even at all. But I don't know how to tell you how I feel, or what would make you happy, or what to give you in return..."

I was about to tell her she didn't need to worry about that kind of thing, but the tears gathering in her eyes were enough to make me swallow the words. Before I knew it, she leaned against me, her breath tickling across my neck.

Her obsidian eyes met mine.

"Makoto..." she murmured. As far as I could remember, she hadn't ever called me by my name, not since I'd become her guardian knight. "Don't keep pushing yourself so hard."

"Princess..."

Her eyes seemed to pierce right through mine, and I couldn't move. I had *Calm Mind* going, didn't I? My heart was pounding in my ears.

Furiae said nothing more. She closed her eyes.

Slowly, so slowly, she leaned in, and as her beautiful features came in close, I felt the brush of her lips against mine. The moment I felt her kiss, I thought I could smell something floral. I was torn about whether I should slide my arms around her shoulders.

But then—

“Makoto! Let’s train!”

“Takatsuki! I made snacks!”

—the door slammed open. Lucy might have been talking about training, but she had a bottle of wine in hand. Sasa had a plate full of food.

Silence consumed the room as we all exchanged glances. After recovering from a beat of shock, Furiae darted away from me.

“I-It’s not what you think!” she yelled.

The other two ignored that statement and walked over.

Lucy sighed. “Just take a drink of this,” she insisted, pouring a *very* full glass of wine.

“Here’s some food to keep your energy up for the night,” Sasa cheered, setting an overflowing plate down next to us.

But...I never really ate much at night...

“U-Um... Lucy? Aya?” Furiae asked, her voice shaking.

There was something bothering me, so I asked the question.

“Did you hear us talking?”

“Of course we did.”

“Loud and clear.”

“Wha?!” Furiae reeled.

Lucy was an elf, so she had sharp ears in more ways than one, while being a lamia meant that Sasa could pick up the slightest vibrations. As far as both of them were concerned, people speaking in the same building might as well be right next to them.

“We didn’t think she’d actually go for the kiss though,” Lucy said.

“Right, Fuu’s pretty bold.”

“W-Wait right there! You heard all of it?!” Furiae demanded in a panic.

I wasn’t exactly *calm* either. That kiss had really startled me.

Lucy nodded enthusiastically. “Come on, Fuuri! Admit how you feel about Makoto.”

“You’re not getting out of it anymore,” Sasa cajoled.

Furiae gasped. “Wait, you let it happen on purpose?!”

“Well, not exactly...”

“We just got excited finally hearing you go for it.”

“Ugh... I can’t believe you overheard...”

The three girls were really getting into the swing of things. *Guys, this is*

my *room...*

Lucy soon beckoned to me. “Come on, Makoto, join in.”

“What about training?” I asked.

“You can do it while you drink!”

She was being way more forceful than usual.

“You made a move on Fuu,” Sasa said.

“S-Sasa?!”

The look in her eyes was terrifying. Furiae had gone red before she’d even started drinking.

Ultimately, the four of us ended up having a bit of a party.

“So? Are you and Fuuri going out?” Lucy asked.

“Ahh, so Fuu’s part of it too now.”

“Mmm...”

Lucy and Sasa just wouldn’t stop asking questions.

“Hold it right there!” Furiae interrupted. “That’s not what this is!”

“Hmm? You still won’t admit it? Even after kissing him?” Lucy asked.

Sasa shook her head. “Looks like you still haven’t had enough to drink.”

“You drink up too!” Lucy demanded, turning to me.

“Why do I have to...?”

At their insistence, I ended up sinking quite a bit of drink. Furiae did too. Even as it got really late, Lucy and Sasa wouldn’t let things go.

“I’m sleeping here tonight!” Furiae declared, falling back onto my bed.

Come on...

“Me too,” said Lucy.

“I’ll go get pillows,” Sasa declared.

Why...?

The three of them seemed really into it, so I didn’t think I’d be able to convince them otherwise. I lay down on the far edge of the mattress and eventually found myself drifting off to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up later than usual.

I rolled to my side and saw Furiae sleeping there. The strap of her negligee had slipped off her shoulder, so I gently pulled it back into place. Sasa and Lucy were wrapped around each other on the other side of the bed. They were definitely getting along well. Though honestly, the population density of this bed was kinda crazy.

I sat up suddenly. *Iblis will be back today.* It felt like tension was consuming the entire town.

Okay! Time to get ready to go out! I decided, moving to stand up. However, the door slammed open before I could move any farther.

"Hero Makoto, Iblis has returned! Make your way to the cathedral and __"

Princess Sophia.

We stared silently at each other. Her eyes then fell on Furiae, then to Lucy and Sasa. Finally, they snapped back to me.

I looked away.

She stalked toward me, and I felt a cold sweat spring up on my back. Then, she—*very*—forcefully pinched my face and yanked it around so I was looking directly at her. I was met by a kind smile...and a pulsing vein in her temple.

"It seems you had a rather enjoyable night."

"I-It's not what you think!" I sputtered.

After a while, I managed to cheer her up again.

"All right, let us be off," she said, taking my arm and steering me toward the cathedral.

The whole point of this meeting was to discuss strategy for everyone involved in the fight against Iblis. Why the cathedral, though? The last time, before the battle against Zagan, we'd met in Highland Castle...

There was also one other thing I was wondering about.

"U-Um...Sophia? You don't need to hold on to my arm so tightly."

"I certainly do. If I don't, you'll find yourself with another woman right away."

"Ah, I wouldn't..."

It seemed she was still angry. I glanced behind us.

Lucy was whistling while Sasa offered an apologetic gesture and a rueful smile. Furiae wouldn't even meet my gaze—she just looked away with red cheeks.

Damn them. Was no one gonna help me out? Well...I'd been the one in the wrong, I guess...

"Sophiaaaa."

She looked pointedly away from me. *Maybe I should give her more*

time...

As we walked, I glanced around. The sky was cloudy and gloomy, and it felt like there were fewer people out and about. Iblis's resurrection hadn't yet been made public, but there was a clear lack of liveliness on everyone's faces.

From the streets, I noticed a gray statue of Abel the Savior standing at the entrance to the capital.

Something was wrong.

I couldn't put it into words...but I felt awful.

"Sophia?"

"What is it? I am not angry with—"

"Um, what color is that statue?"

She looked questioningly at me.

"Ah...of course. You mean the one of Hero Abel, right?"

"Huh?"

For a second, I didn't believe my ears. Unlike Sasa and I who had come from another world, Lucy and Princess Sophia had always called him "Abel the Savior" due to the clear distinction between Abel and normal heroes. The savior's name was absolute to the people of this world. A priestess of the church would surely never use it incorrectly...

"Let us hurry, Hero Makoto. Lady Noelle is waiting."

"R-Right."

We never got to discuss my misgivings or what the princess had actually said—quickly, we hurried to the cathedral.

It was already packed with people. I spied royals from each country, nobles, heroes, priestesses, knights that had made a name for themselves...and so on.

There were people I knew, but also those I'd never seen before.

In the front of the room, a statue of Althena sat on a raised platform. Princess Noelle and Estelle were standing on the same platform.

"Lady Noelle is currently acting as the pope," Princess Sophia explained in a whisper. *So the last pope has already been removed...* That was all good as far as I was concerned—I didn't want to see him anyway.

"Makoto Takatsuki!"

"Janet?" A knight clad in golden armor raced over to me, and I turned my gaze toward her.

“You seem well. Where will you be posted? If it hasn’t been decided, then I can convince the commander to—”

Princess Sophia interrupted her. “He will likely be with the same forces as the Hero of Light. Lady Noelle has said as much.”

“I will?” I actually hadn’t heard that.

“Indeed. The Hero of Light requested it himself, apparently.”

“The same... Then that means you will be with Commander Owain’s forces. It should be simple then.” She giggled, giving me a meaningful smile. “We will fight together, Hero Makoto.”

“I trust you will take care of him,” Princess Sophia said.

“Oh?” Janet seemed surprised. “I thought you were against me being near him.”

“I am... But I cannot be on the battlefield, so I need you to ensure that he does not go too far.”

“Got it. I’ll do my best to make sure it doesn’t end the same way as last time!” she said cheerily.

Janet wore a reliable-looking expression, and Princess Sophia smiled back. Then, she gave me a meaningful look.

“Incidentally, *all* of the women in the party have been with Hero Makoto, so I think you will find it difficult to make a place for yourself.”

Janet looked at me in shock.

“Y-You...made a move on the Priestess of the Moon? She’s a *saint* now!”

“The norms of that ilk have no hold on my fiancé,” Princess Sophia lamented. “I personally saw them sharing a bed this morning.”

“What an awful man... Sophia, you do not have it easy.”

“Janet...this, too, is part of my royal duties...”

“I am on your side,” the knight told her.

It felt kinda like they were using me and becoming friends at my expense.

“Silence, everyone!” a Temple Knight called loudly. The huge doors to the cathedral shut with a *thud*.

“Everyone involved is now assembled.” Princess Noelle’s voice carried across the hall. The cathedral had enough seats for hundreds of people, but nearly all of them were filled. There were also lines of knights—likely bodyguards—stationed along the walls. Formations of Temple Knights

stood outside as well. All in all, I was pretty sure this was currently the most important place on the continent.

Our party took seats at the back of the room. Janet's armor clanked slightly as she sat nearby. *Shouldn't she be with the rest of the Ballantines?*

"The goddess has important news about Iblis's return," Princess Noelle said, giving Estelle—no, Ira—a look. Immediately, her body began to glow, and immense amounts of mana filled the air. Several wings of light sprouted from her back and literally everyone in the cathedral bowed their heads.

She's acting like she only just descended...but she's been there the whole time, hasn't she?

Even as I followed suit, bowing my head, I glanced at her face. Oops, she was glaring at me. She must have heard my thoughts. But...she looked really tired.

"Raise your heads," she said solemnly. Then, she cast her gaze over everyone present. "I have news for you all. I believe you may have already heard, but today marks a thousand years since Iblis was defeated. This is also the day of his return."

The room began to stir.

"However, he does not have his full power. Only two of the demon lords remain on the demon continent, so the situation has changed drastically in the past thousand years. We have the forces to fight back. A direct attack could very well end in victory."

Well, that's the outcome we'd been preparing for over the past several years. A murmur of relief swept the crowd. Various nobles and military personnel around us were muttering.

"So the time has come..."

"True peace will reign after Iblis is defeated..."

"I am ready..."

They certainly sounded motivated.

However, the dark expression on Princess Noelle's face was bothering me. She was probably worried for Sakurai. I looked around and spied him right at the front, next to Owain.

"The countries stand together in a powerful alliance. The demon lords have decreased in number, and Iblis is not at full power. If we were to attack, now would be the time. Or...it should be."

There was a questioning silence. It felt like things were getting off track.

The cathedral began to stir once again, and if you looked closely, you could see the graveness of Ira's expression.

"Iblis was not without a plan for his resurrection," Ira said. "His weaker armies have taken cowardly actions. We have already felt that influence here...no, across the whole continent. The wicked strength of the Great Demon Lord threatens our very lives."

Whoa, hold on there, Ira! Where'd all that morale go?!

Everyone else also seemed lost at those words.

"I shall speak plainly. As things stand, we cannot win against Iblis. Things can only end in defeat."

"Wh-What do you mean?!" a noble of Highland demanded.

"I will explain... However, there is someone I will call on first."

Ira lifted a hand, and a huge magic circle appeared in the air. It shone in a familiar rainbow of colors—a summoning circle. However, familiar or not, a human could never use a spell that powerful. Only the strength of Ira's anima enabled its activation. The person who came from it was also familiar: a tall, beautiful goddess.

Should she be descending so freely? I wondered.

This was Althena, who I had met only the other day.

Chapter 7 — Makoto Takatsuki Receives a Divine Revelation

Althena stepped from the glowing magic circle. She looked down on everyone from her elevated position, and judging by her expression, she was in a bad mood. The slight warmth present in the room when Ira had revealed herself was gone. Instead, the air felt stifling, drawn taut by the pressure Althena exuded. Everyone was sweating buckets from just feeling her eyes on them. No one spoke—silence reigned in the cathedral.

"The situation is grave," Althena stated. "Iblis has likely decided that he cannot win a fight against humanity when your preparations have been so thorough. As such, he has utilized forbidden techniques to change the outcome."

"Forbidden techniques?" Princess Noelle asked for everyone. "What exactly do you mean?"

"Altering history...and interfering with the past using *Fate Magic*," Ira answered.

I heard people gulp.

Altering history...? What in the...

Ira continued, her voice dark. "Iblis's spell is attempting to reach a thousand years into the past and kill Hero Abel. That will throw all of history into disorder...and it will become impossible for you to defeat Iblis in this era."

The room remained quiet until the details finally registered with everyone, at which point, the cathedral erupted.

"H-How can that be possible?!"

"That is an act of the gods!"

"Impossible!"

Manipulating the past with magic was something many mages had tried to achieve, but it had yet to be made a reality. That magic was supposed to lie squarely in the realm of the gods.

Eternal life, stopping time, and time travel... There were no mages who had achieved any one of those without imperfections. All that lived died, time marched on, and history was immutable...or so it should have been.

"We do not know what method he has used. It is highly possible that he has borrowed strength from the Daemons...though we cannot stop and investigate that. With each moment that passes, the modification progresses. You are already losing your memories of Hero Abel."

A chorus of gasps rang out from everyone present.

"Sophia, Lucy?" I asked.

"Why... Why can I not remember the savior...?"

"M-Makoto...what do I do? I can't remember any of the details. I know that I memorized everything and read so many picture books as a kid..."

Both of them looked pale. *So history really is changing...*

"Althena, we beseech you for guidance. How should we navigate this crisis?" Princess Noelle asked this calmly, but her voice was wavering.

"Is it possible for us to use the same magic?" Sakurai asked. "If our enemy is altering the past, then we should do the same!"

"That is impossible, Hero of Light," the Grandsage interrupted. She'd said a little while ago that she was traveling to Caol Ilan, but she must have come back.

"Why, Grandsage?"

"Mortals cannot use that kind of power. I can use some *Fate Magic*...but just enough to see a tiny amount of the future. It is impossible for mortal magic to alter the past."

No one on the continent is a better mage than the Grandsage. If she says it's impossible, then it must be.

"Iblis likely used thousands, no, tens of thousands of sacrifices to Typhon to gain that kind of power..." she explained. "It is not a spell anyone can mimic."

Everyone's faces paled. *Tens of thousands of sacrifices... Hence it being forbidden, I guess.*

"So...is there any other method?" Princess Noelle asked, her voice growing quieter by the word.

Althena said nothing. Ira remained silent as well.

Guys...come on! Say something!

"There is nothing you can do..." Ira answered.

I heard a quiet, mournful exclamation.

“In this instance...it is we, the divine, who must take responsibility for not noticing the alteration of history,” she said quietly. “So, we shall help you.”

Everyone swallowed thickly, waiting for her to continue.

“Ordinarily, the gods are not permitted to directly interfere in mortal affairs. We are bound by compacts between our kind... If those laws are broken, others will also interfere, and finally, war will break out among the divine. In that case, the world...will end.”

Ira paused, allowing the room to feel the weight of her words, and then continued.

“However, I will break those rules. As punishment...I will no longer be able to descend. I will also be unable to give skills to heroes or priestesses. Losing its core faith, I imagine that Cameron will begin to fall. However, that outcome is better than succumbing to the demon army.”

The nobles and warriors of Cameron began to despair. However, no one spoke out against her.

“Ira, may I ask specifically how you will aid us?” Princess Noelle asked.

Ira looked over the gathered people, seeming to firm her resolve, and then spoke.

“I will utilize a miracle and send a warrior a thousand years into the past. That person will aid Hero Abel in his survival.”

A cheer rang out in the cathedral.

“I will go!” Gerald exclaimed, immediately offering himself. He was a pretty manly man.

“Wait, I’ll go too!” Olga shouted.

They were both so sure of themselves!

“I appreciate your courageous offers. However, I can only send a single person...” Ira said apologetically.

“Then it should be me,” Gerald said. “No one has any complaints, right?”

He was a high-ranking hero, and he had the *Hero of Lightning* skill, which Abel had also possessed. Judging by everyone’s reactions, no one seemed to object.

“No. Hero of Lightning, Gerald, you have built your fame over a long time on this continent. Sending you would ensure that the Daemons notice

our plan. The same goes for Olga, Hero of Incandescence," Althena said. "This time travel will be presented as a *mistake* by Ira, so we cannot send a famous person from this world. The most appropriate candidate would be someone who has been unknown until recently."

A mistake by Ira...that certainly seemed possible. Ack, she was glaring at me. Either way, if neither of them would work, then who would?

"Someone unknown until recently... So, an otherworlder...?" I heard someone say.

"Would that mean Ryousuke?!" Princess Noelle practically screamed, breaking her earlier calm. Well, if they could only send one person, then the only strong otherworlder I could think of was Sakurai...

Althena shook her head, offering a concise refusal. "Noelle, the Hero of Light has the duty of defeating Iblis in the present. We cannot send him to the past."

"I-I see..." Sakurai said. He sounded shocked. He must have expected to be chosen as well.

"Lady Ira," Commander Owain spoke up. "Highland and Great Keith have several orichalcum adventurers and the like who are on the level of heroes without possessing the title. Shall I call for them?"

Makes sense. The person doesn't have to be a hero.

But Ira shook her head, still wearing a dark expression. "That will not work. The spell to send the warrior to the past must be as inconspicuous as possible..."

"I shall inform you of the conditions that make a suitable candidate," Ira said clearly. "A hero, priestess, or anyone with a strong skill will immediately be noticed by the Daemons. While the adventurers you mentioned are not heroes, they have saint or king rank skills and are thus ineligible."

"So mom or the Grandsage won't work either," Lucy murmured.

True. Rosalie might be reliable, but the conditions Ira had just given would discount her.

"Then how strong can they be before going over that limit?" General Talisker asked, voicing the question on everyone's minds.

"By mortal averages... They can have only mid rank or lower skills. That is what would make someone suitable."

"That...is quite the requirement..." Owain grumbled.

Yeah, definitely too extreme.

"Complaining will do us no good. We need to gather candidates. We must find someone with only mid rank or lower skills who can help Sir Abel." Despite the dark mood, Princess Noelle was still speaking optimistically.

But...

"That will not be necessary," Althena said bluntly. "Ira has already checked all possible futures."

"Sh-She has...?" came the shocked response.

Ira had seen the future of everyone on the continent? Well...it made sense that she was tired.

"We have evaluated all of those who follow the Sacred Deities," Althena said, face expressionless. "Unfortunately, no matter who of the goddesses' faithful we send, none will be able to alter the past. Hero Abel will lose his life."

Princess Noelle uttered a cry of despair. No, it wasn't just her—everyone in the room had lost the light in their eyes.

The ruler of the whole world had said that Abel was absolutely going to die. I could already hear people saying that it was all over.

"However...there is still a possibility."

People lifted their heads at the goddess's statement, waiting desperately for her next words. Althena hesitated for a moment, letting her gaze move around the room before slowly, it fell upon my party. Her sharp eyes speared me. She opened her mouth, and when she spoke, her voice was distant, almost as if what she was saying had nothing to do with her.

"Makoto Takatsuki, we have a *revelation* for you."

I had a...*bad* feeling. Honestly, I was scared of hearing what she'd say next.

"You are the only one..." she said, and this time, her voice was hesitant. She looked and sounded even more apologetic than when she'd been in Noah's space. "You are the only one whose future Ira cannot see...and the only one who can change the past."

By my side, I heard Princess Sophia gasp.

Come on! Gimme a break...

"Makoto Takatsuki, will you travel back a thousand years to save Hero Abel...and the world?"

To me, her words sounded like a death sentence. *No, more like a trip to hell.* But, looking closely, her expression seemed slightly pained.

Everyone in the room turned to look at me, all the way to the back of the cathedral where I was sitting. All seemed to be waiting for my response.

I glanced up for a moment. Decorating the ceiling were paintings of goddesses surrounded by angels.

I'd expected a selection screen from *RPG Player*, but nothing popped up. *A thousand years in the past to save Abel the Savior... Why me?* It looked like there wasn't anyone else suitable though. Also, if I turned them down, the world would end.

Could I deal with that? No...I couldn't.

I'll have to go.

I stood and started walking up to the platform where the goddesses waited, scratching my head as I went.

"Hero Makoto..."

Someone grabbed hold of my arm.

"Sophia..." I murmured.

"Are you...leaving?"

Her teary face stopped me from answering right away. "Depending on the conditions," I replied with a vague laugh.

I strode slowly through the cathedral, and after a moment, I noticed that Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae were walking with me. When I stopped in front of the platform, I found myself standing before Althena.

"There are several things I want to ask," I said.

She offered a solemn nod. "I will answer."

"If I go back to the past, will I be able to return to the present?" That was the most important thing. If I was the only one who could fix the past, then I'd have to go. But...I really didn't want it to be a one-way journey.

"I will answer that," Ira put forward quietly. "At present, we rule the world—our current era is one of light. That is what makes it easy to send you to the past. However, a thousand years ago, the Daemons ruled over an era of darkness. The power we had on the planet back then was much lower...and we will not gain enough power for time travel until a hundred years after Iblis's defeat."

"No!" Sasa screamed.

"S-So...?" Lucy asked, her voice shaking.

“Makoto Takatsuki...” Ira said, words heavy. “We cannot return you to the present.”

Come on, for real?

“Refuse, my knight!” Furiae yelled. “There is no need for you to put yourself through this!”

She had a point—this was unfair no matter which way you sliced it. They were essentially telling me to sacrifice myself for the world. I said nothing and fixed my gaze on Althena. She should already know my thoughts.

“Makoto Takatsuki, I will grant your desires.”

“My...desires?” I didn’t want standing or money, and she knew that. So, she continued with something else.

“The restrictions on Noah’s believers will be released.”

“Huh?”

“Noah will be able to have as many as she wishes.”

“I see...”

That was definitely a big win. Currently, Noah could only have one believer at a time, and right now, her “one” was me. Though, that aside...

“Is that it?” I asked.

The majority of people on the continent followed the Sacred Deities, and recruiting more believers would be pretty difficult for Noah since she was treated as a wicked deity. That was precisely why she had focused on me—I was an otherworlder and had not been raised knowing the difference.

“Of course not. We will accept Noah as the eighth goddess on this continent. In other words, she will not be considered a wicked deity any longer. She will become a full member of our pantheon.”

“Huh...”

That was incredible. She’d be going from wicked deity to a pillar of faith.

“Wha?!” came the inarticulate roar from the rest of the room.

Well, that made sense—everyone in this world had been taught that wicked deities were evil, and soon, that same deity would be receiving their prayers. I glanced to my side and saw Lucy and Furiae lost for words. Even Princess Noelle, still standing on the stage, looked shocked.

So this is a real *exception.* It was the biggest thing they’d offered. However, if they’d go this far...

“You may as well just free her from the Seafloor Temple...” I muttered.

Althena’s answer seemed hesitant. “I...cannot.”

“Why? You’re being stingy.”

Everyone else jolted back, but Althena didn’t pay my rudeness any mind. She moved in close and whispered into my ear.

“I thought the same and asked father for permission. That damned fossil said no... Apparently, if he lets her out now, then he can’t use her potential freedom as leverage for a marriage between them! She’s my childhood friend! That makes it bad enough, but he isn’t even slightly sorry about secretly having Alec!”

“Althena,” I whispered back, “you’re slipping.”

She paused for a moment, then said, “Sorry,” before backing away.

Wow, she really does have it tough...

“So, what will you do, Makoto Takatsuki?” Ira asked.

“Are you leaving, Makoto?” Lucy asked uneasily.

“Hero Makoto...” Princess Sophia said, a hand on my sleeve. I hadn’t even noticed her approach.

What should I do?

As I thought, I realized that the most important person, the person I would need to consult with before making this decision, wasn’t here. I couldn’t decide without her.

Althena met my eye and nodded. “Indeed, we need to call her as well.” She raised a hand, and another huge magic circle appeared, glowing in prismatic rainbow colors.

“Come forth, Wicked Deity Noah,” Althena commanded. The cathedral as a whole seemed to shudder.

“A wicked deity?!”

“This is the Holy Mother’s Cathedral!”

“But Althena said she would become the eighth goddess...”

“How horrifying will this goddess be?”

I listened to their comments with half an ear as light spilled out of the circle. Then, people began to gasp.

“Call and I shall come forth! Ta-da!” Noah cheered, leaping out of the circle.

Silence.

I noticed a huge disparity in the tension before and after Noah’s arrival.

People had been fraught with anticipation and afraid of seeing a wicked deity, but when Noah came through, she was just...Noah. Frankly, it made the whole cathedral feel weird.

Goddess? Could you not with the mood breaker?

Ira held her head while Althena grimaced.

"You slipped, Noah."

"Oh, I did?" my goddess asked, humming as she shook her hair out. She was as gorgeous as ever.

Lucy and Sasa were at a loss for words too. I sighed, then turned to my friends with a rueful smile.

"C'mon, Lucy. She might be a bit weird, but she's usually more serious and— Huh?"

Lucy had collapsed to the floor.

"Wha?! L-Lucy! Stay with me!" I called, looking into her eyes and trying to wake her up. But they weren't focusing, and there was a line of drool coming from her mouth. She'd fainted.

"Ah...ahhhh...ahh..."

By her side, Sasa was groaning, still standing upright but with vacant eyes.

"Sasa?! Are you okay?!" I looked around, trying to work out what to do as I held Lucy.

"Uhh...uaahha..."

"Ahh...ahhhhh!"

"Cree...creheehee..."

Everyone in the room was acting weird. What the hell?

"Noah!" Althena's angry yell broke over the groans.

Ira then cried out, "What are you thinking, coming into the mortal realm in your true form?! Hide yourself already! Everyone here's gone mad!"

Huh... Gone mad?

"Oh, right. I just appeared as I usually do in front of Makoto," Noah murmured, seemingly unconcerned. Suddenly, she went semitransparent. "There, that should be fine."

"Nothing about this is 'fine'! The leaders of the continent are all here!"

"Noah...could you give me my friends back?" I chided.

"Fine, fine." She sighed, snapping her fingers. "Elementals of time, turn back the clock."

The surroundings were engulfed in a rainbow. I felt dizzy for a moment and the air seemed oddly thick. That feeling soon went away, and the light vanished.

When I looked around, I saw that things were the same as they'd been before.

"H-Huh?"

"Hm?"

Lucy and Sasa peered around, confused.

"Lucy! Sasa!"

Thank goodness they were back. Everyone else seemed to have recovered as well.

Ira shook her head. "Noah, you're so..."

"What, got a problem?" Noah demanded.

"We'll talk later," Althena told her.

Both of them certainly *did* have a problem, and even as I listened to the discussion, it was only with half my attention. I didn't know *how* it'd happened at all, but I knew *what* had happened. It was a miracle—time had reversed.

I knew this was one of the ways to bring back the dead. Noah had just arrived carrying the big guns, magicwise. Also, what were those time elementals? I couldn't really understand, and as I was trying to parse everything, Noah spoke to me.

"See, it's all back to normal, right?" She grinned. That carefree expression was honestly pretty scary.

"Hey, Makoto," Lucy whispered into my ear. "Your goddess is kinda..."

Right, this was the first time they'd all met.

"Don't say it like that," Noah complained.

"You always talk her up, Takatsuki," Sasa said, "so I had this picture in my mind of a really good goddess..."

"That's strange, my knight. It seems like you are being taken in by some odd woman..."

Huh. They'd all gotten a really bad impression of Noah.

Around us, I could hear everyone murmuring in fear of the wicked deities.

My goddess didn't seem to care at all. *This is bad, Noah. They're all scared.*

She must have heard my thoughts because she tilted her head and then put a finger to her cheek, stepping forward across the platform.

"Hi, everyone☆ I'm Noah♡"

She winked. Immediately, I felt a refreshing breeze accompanied by a floral scent. It was almost like we were in a flower field... *Wait, are there literally flowers here?! Is this an illusion...?*

"Ahhh, Noah..."

"How lovely!"

"I'll join your faith..."

The people in the cathedral suddenly sprouted hearts in their eyes. Whoa, she'd charmed them like it was nothing.

"Kinda suspicious..."

"Very."

"She's an enemy..."

On the other hand, Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae hadn't been charmed.

"Aww, don't make me sad. I've been watching you all this time," Noah said, hopping off the stage and walking over to us.

The three of them shuddered.

"Come on, Lucy, Aya, let's all be friends. Why not convert to me?"

"U-Uh..."

"I-I'm scared, Takatsuki..."

Her anima was billowing around us and frightening them.

"Noah, stop threatening my friends, please," I said, tugging at her. What was she playing at?

"I'm just inviting them."

"I'll invite the two of them," I said firmly.

"Well, I'm just so excited to be down here again!"

"*Too* excited," I remarked, dragging her back to the platform.

"Now, Noah—order your disciple to go back a thousand years in the past," Althena said.

"Hm? No way."

Althena balked at the immediate refusal. "What?"

"Noah?" I asked.

She'd be elevated as the eighth goddess *and* would be able to recruit more believers. After being treated as evil for so long, that should be the thing the Titanea wanted most of all. And, if she could gain more believers,

the Titanea as a whole would grow stronger. Frankly, I'd expected her to give me the order right away...

"Makoto, you decide by yourself," she declared.

I had no words.

"Noah...what are you planning?" Althena asked harshly.

Noah wore her usual kind smile...the same smile she'd worn since the first time we'd met. Her pale, translucent hand rested on my cheek. "Makoto, you can choose. Decide whether to *save* the world...or *damn* it..."

There wasn't a hint of a shadow in her smile as she burdened me with the heaviest decision of my life.

No, it was the same smile she always wore.

My eyes roamed the area, and I used *RPG Player* to glance at my friends' faces without moving my head. Once again, I'd expected an *RPG Player* selection...but there was still nothing.

Lucy looked generally unhappy.

Sasa was tearing up.

Princess Sophia was keeping a cool expression, but beneath the surface, she seemed to be struggling to endure.

Furiae looked like an abandoned kitten.

My resolve faltered. I went to say something, then stopped.

If they try to keep me here, I'll probably let them.

I turned back to my goddess. "Noah."

"Yup, Makoto?"

"I'll go back in time. I'll help Abel the Savior."

The cathedral seemed to sigh out a collective held breath. Even Althena looked relieved.

"Are you sure? You won't be able to see anyone you care about ever again."

"Don't make me second-guess myself," I said with a rueful smile. Then, as I climbed down from the platform, I turned back to my friends. "Sorry, guys. I'm going."

"Takatsuki...don't..." Sasa pleaded, grabbing my arm and burying her face in my chest. "I'll come with you. Goddess, I want to go with him..."

"Aya Sasaki. We can only send a single person back. You cannot accompany him."

"That's not f-fair..."

All I could do was hold her as she cried. Someone else then approached me from behind.

“Hero Makoto. You have the prestigious role of aiding the savior. I pray for your...” Her words suddenly trailed off.

“Sophia...” I murmured.

“I’m sorry. You’re the one who is suffering here, but...”

Her gaze fell. *What should I say...?*

“Aww, you’re always forcing yourself,” said a cheerful, disembodied voice. Out of nowhere, Eir suddenly appeared, wrapping her arms around Princess Sophia from behind.

“Eir?!” she exclaimed.

I gave the water goddess a questioning look. “So, when did you descend?”

“Hmm, I got summoned from the Seafloor Temple along with Noah.”

“B-But you shouldn’t...” Princess Sophia stammered.

Seriously, guys? I looked at Althena and saw her awkwardly scratching her cheek. So she hadn’t *meant* to summon Eir...

“It’s all right, Sophie. You’re allowed to cry when you’re sad.”

Princess Sophia was silent for a few moments, then she whispered. “Okay.”

I can probably rely on Eir to look after her. As for the others...

I met Furiae’s eyes. Her usual aloof expression had vanished, and she was acting really meek.

“M-My knight...”

“Sorry, Princess. I’m your guardian knight, but I won’t be able to stay by your side anymore.”

“Forget about me! Are *you* going to be all right? You have to go a thousand years into the past, all on your own. That’s horrible...” She made her way over and took my hand. Her fingers were shaking ever so slightly.

“I don’t really have a choice. It’s better than the world ending, right?”

“But...you only just came back... Why— Why do you have to...?”

“Guess it’s just bad luck.”

She sighed. “You’re always so easygoing...”

“Good luck building your new nation.”

“Thank you...”

Furiae must have understood how adamant I was about leaving—she let

her hand slip from mine.

Finally, I turned to the redheaded elf girl who had thus far stayed silent.

“Lucy, I’m—”

I was going to apologize for not being able to adventure together anymore, but she cut me off.

“Makoto!”

She was glaring, her arms crossed. Lucy had been my first friend in this world, and she was the girl I’d spent the most time with here. *Looks like we aren’t going to be able to keep our promise to clear the Seafloor Temple together...*

“Promise me.”

“Promise you?” I parroted.

“That you’ll come back!” she exclaimed. “When you save Hero Abel and defeat Iblis, you’re coming back to us!” She pointed an insistent finger at me.

“Lucy...”

I wanted nothing more than to return...but Ira had just explained that I wouldn’t be able to.

“Lucy J. Walker... I have said already, but there is no way for Makoto Taka—”

Lucy didn’t even let Ira finish her sentence.

“Shut it! You shitty goddess!”

Ira gaped at her. “Wha?!”

“Makoto!” she shouted, turning to me. “You’re coming back! Promise me!”

As if in response to her words, letters on a selection screen floated up in front of me.

Oh?

```
Will you make a promise to Lucy?
Yes
No
```

An option now*?* Althena and Noah’s requests hadn’t prompted *RPG Player* at all...

Going a thousand years into the past... Coming back...

“M-My knight...” Timidly, Furiae took a step back.

“Makoto Takatsuki?!” cried Ira. “Y-You cannot— Mph!”

“That’s enough.” Noah said, covering Ira’s mouth. “No getting in the way of tearful farewells, okay?”

Huh. So Furiae and the goddesses could see the *RPG Player* choice screen... Regardless, I had to answer the question before doing anything else.

“Lucy,” I said, meeting her burning red eyes for a moment before glancing at the selection screen in front of me. *Now that I think about it, didn’t a choice like this come up over and over again when Lucy and I first teamed up?* Back then, I hadn’t been able to say no to Lucy (or *choose* “No”), so she and I had ended up in the same party. The memory made me smile slightly, and I knew—I wouldn’t be able to turn her down this time either.

“What?” Lucy demanded, her eyes hooded as she glared at my smile.

I took a step closer to her. “I promise. I’ll come back to you.”

And with that vow, “Yes” was chosen.

“Hmph. It’s a promise then. Don’t even try going back on your word—I won’t let you get away with it!”

She turned pointedly away, her arms folded. Well, I *had* promised...so I’d just have to keep it.

Now that I’d offered farewells to my party, the only people left were...

“Sir Makoto...”

“Takatsuki...”

Princess Noelle looked conflicted—Sakurai was on the verge of tears. He was now solely responsible for defeating Iblis, wasn’t he? *I’ll do my best in the past, so the present’s up to you, Sakurai.*

“See you both,” I said with a clumsy smile. “Princess Noelle, look after Sakurai, will you?”

I then glanced down at a small figure next to Sakurai, who was looking fixedly at me. The Grandsage. I needed to say goodbye to her as well.

“Sorry, Grandsage. I know I only just became your guardian knight.”

“It matters not,” she said, her voice sounding almost completely apathetic. The tone made me feel kind of sad. “Look after Abel.”

“I will.”

Her words—the words of a hero who’d once saved the world—were brief. Despite that, they were heavy. The Grandsage wasn’t smirking like she usually was—she just stared at me with a blank expression.

“By the way...did we meet back in the past?” I asked. This was something I’d really wondered about. After all, she was the only person here who’d actually been around a thousand years ago.

She didn’t reply.

“Grandsage?” I asked.

“I didn’t meet you, no, Elementalist.”

“I...see.” That was a shame. It would be a relief knowing that I’d get to work with her. Apparently not, though.

I turned around, looking out over everyone gathered in the cathedral. All eyes were focused on me. *I’d like to go around and actually say bye to everyone, but we don’t have the time.* And so, I got back onto the platform and knelt in front of Noah.

“I will be on my way then, Goddess.”

“Right. If you’re sure...then fine.”

She put a hand on my head. *Maybe she’s about to say farewell or something.*

“In the name of Noah, I remove you from my faith.”

“Wha?” That was *definitely* not what I’d expected. “Wh-What are you doing?!”

Despite my yelling, her face remained calm. Frantically, I pulled out my Soul Book... It was already gone?! What was she thinking?!

“I had another disciple back then. A thousand years ago, you could not have been my believer. After all, I was restricted to having only one.”

I let out a breath. It made sense, but still... I wish she’d explained first.

“Althena, Makoto’s heading back on his own, so give him some kind of blessing.”

“Hm... His low stats mean I can’t give him a strong skill...”

“Anything’s better than nothing.”

“I suppose so.” Althena held out a hand toward me. “In the name of Althena, I bless you.” A soft light coated me, and Althena explained that she’d given me *Sun Magic (Low Rank)*.

Oooh, a new skill?

“M-Me too!” Ira wrapped her arms around me in a hug. *Hey?!* Estelle’s small frame squeezed me tightly. “Makoto Takatsuki... I am sorry. I’ve caused so much trouble for you. I give you Ira’s blessings, and I pray for your safety during your journey. Here’s *Fate Magic (Low Rank)*.”

The gentle light glowed around us—she kept her hold on me for a while longer.

“Thank you, Ira.”

“When you arrive...come and see me. I can share my memories between the present and past, so I can give you advice... That’s *all* I can give you, but still.”

“Got it—I’ll look for you. I just need to find your priestess from back then, right?”

“That’s right,” Ira whispered, still hugging me. “If she hasn’t been killed yet.”

Uh, can you let go already? I feel some pretty cold gazes coming from behind me.

“That’s enough, Ira. Off you get,” Noah said, tugging her away. “Start the spell already.”

“I-I know!” Ira protested. She straightened, then began to chant.

So...this spell was vast enough that even a goddess had to chant? *I suppose that makes sense for such a leap into the past. It must be damn impressive.*

“Makoto, there are several things I need to tell you,” Noah said, launching into an explanation of what the world was like a millennium ago.

She told me about Iblis, the nine demon lords, and especially about her previous believer. Then, she started talking again about how I wouldn’t be *hers*. That last part...was pretty tough to hear.

“Makoto Takatsuki, I have one more thing to tell you,” Althena said, interrupting Noah’s speech. “Your duty is to go to the past and save Hero Abel’s life. You need not concern yourself with anything else.”

“Anything else...?” That was a weird thing to say.

“You’re too indirect, Althena. Are you listening, Makoto? Essentially, she’s saying that if you save Abel, it doesn’t matter what else you do. Even if it majorly changes the past.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t say that!” Althena protested.

So...I could change the past, even though I was going to the past to stop it from being changed? Actually, wasn’t keeping the past consistent like rule number one of time travel?

“Makoto, thinking like that won’t give you the edge you’ll need,” Noah told me. “If you’re careless, you won’t survive. Ira will be working like hell to keep history on track, so you just need to focus on saving Abel, okay?”

“While that phrasing leaves much to be desired...she is correct,” Althena said to me. “Do not worry about history—just focus on Hero Abel. Even if your actions do alter history, it will be Ira’s role to fix that.”

“Ugh...” Ira said, tearing up. “I’ll do my best.”

Was... Was she going to be all right?

Regardless, I understood now. Ira would manage with some minor changes to history. All I had to do was stop what she couldn’t—Hero Abel’s death. Essentially, I was being given a blank check to do whatever I needed in order to achieve that end.

Still...what on earth had happened back then...?

“Hero Makoto!” Princess Sophia called, running up. “Take this with you.”

“What’s—”

She thrust a small picture book into my hands. The cover read “The Legend of Hero Abel.”

“If you read that, you should be able to find out where he is,” Eir explained.

“Oh, I get it. Thanks, Sophia, Eir,” I said with a nod. Knowing what history was supposed to look like would be a big help.

As for anything else I needed... Well, there were lots of things I wanted to bring along, but it didn’t look like we had the time.

“Makoto Takatsuki, I am ready,” announced Ira.

A huge gate of rainbow light opened up on the platform.

“If you pass through this Spacetime Gate, you will arrive at a point a thousand years ago. I cannot say exactly *where* you will land, but usually, it is somewhere of great significance to you. Thus, I believe you will be sent to Roses.”

“Got it,” I replied.

Before I stepped into the gate, I looked over at my friends one last time.

Lucy was staring at me firmly. Sasa had tears streaming down her face. Princess Sophia was forcing a smile. Furiae seemed like she was about to cry.

And...

Noah looked the same as ever.

“I’ll be off, then.”

I took a deep breath, then stepped through the Spacetime Gate.

And that was how I set out on a journey a thousand years into the past.

Chapter 8 — Makoto Takatsuki Steps Back a Millennium

As I passed through the gate, it felt like my skull split open.

I pressed my hands against my head, and the next thing I knew, I'd been absorbed by pitch-black darkness. This was a weird space—I couldn't tell what was forward, back, left, right, up, or down. I couldn't see anything; I couldn't hear anything. It felt like all my senses had been taken from me.

Were my eyes open or closed?

Was I breathing or not?

Was I alive or dead?

I didn't know any of that... My mind grew hazy.

How much time had passed? Perhaps an instant...or perhaps ages. I didn't even notice myself slip into unconsciousness.

When I woke up, I was in an unfamiliar place. A kaleidoscope of colors formed a barrier around me.

Is this...something Ira cast?

Lightly, I pressed a finger against the barrier, and it vanished without a sound. *Huh. Guess it'd been made so I could get out as soon as I woke up.*

I glanced around, and all I could see were plains. There wasn't enough grass to call them grassy and not enough trees to call anything a forest. This was just unmaintained wilderness...and not anywhere I recognized.

So, was I actually in the past?

I looked up. The sky was covered in dark black clouds. No sunlight was able to shine through, and it was like the whole world was covered in ashen gray.

This is Iblis's spell, Clouds of Darkness...

I remembered learning about the "dark ages" in the Water Temple. Evidence of that era was spread out around me.

I was definitely in the past.

Noah, I called mentally, but there was no response. When I'd last opened my Soul Book, all mention of my faith had been stricken, however, the *Elementalist* skill she had given me was still there. I'd also kept her dagger, which was still strapped to my waist. Those small signs were the only indicators that I had ever followed her.

I don't know anyone here...

This moment brought back memories of leaving the Water Temple and setting out alone on a journey. Actually, back then, I could have returned to the temple if things had gone wrong. I'd also known that Fujiyan was in Macallan. Now, I had nowhere to return to. Upon realizing this, I felt a persistent sense of unease. I activated *Calm Mind,* and after a while, I managed to relax myself a bit.

"Guess I have to look for Abel the Savior..."

It's time to head out and stop thinking about every little thing. I'll be fine. I'll manage.

"There's no one around..."

Now that I'd been walking for hours, I was talking to myself a lot. So far, I'd seen plenty of wild animals, but no people. It was getting depressing.

Actually, where are the towns and villages? Where am I?

Ira had said I should land around modern-day Roses...but I wasn't seeing anything familiar. If I could at least spot the massive lake—Lake Chimay—in the center of the country, then I'd be able to figure out where I was, but...

Suddenly, my thoughts were cut off—I heard a conversation in the distance.

People! I lurched, ready to run toward them, but then I changed my mind. These were the dark ages—Iblis ruled the world. The ones speaking could be demons. Actually...that was pretty likely.

Stealth.

I made my way over to the voices, concealing myself. The foliage was high around me, so I could hide completely if I crouched. I used *Listen* to pick up what they were actually saying.

"Geh heh, this is my prey! I found it!"

"Don't be a bitch. You can gimme half."

"Ah... He...lp..."

Yeah, I couldn't even pretend that sounded friendly. Something was wrong.

Clairvoyance.

Three figures. One was a young girl, shaking with fear. The other two...were monsters. One was a chimera, and the other was a griffin. They looked like ordinary monsters, but they were speaking fluently.

So the monsters from a thousand years ago can talk?

"Fine. Then I'm taking the top half."

"No fair. You know the bottom's harder to eat."

It sounded like they were debating how to split up the girl, who stood frozen like a deer in headlights. Suddenly, letters floated up in front of me.

```
Save the girl?
▶ Yes
No
```

I remembered heading out of the Water Temple and fighting goblins for the first time. Unlike back then, I didn't hesitate to make a choice.

"××××××××××××. (Elementals, elementals, lend me a hand.)"

Sure!!! cheered a massive chorus of water elementals. It felt like they'd been just *waiting* for me to ask. Immediately, I felt a huge pool of mana swirling around me.

The air shook—the ground shuddered under my feet. This...was way more mana than I'd expected.

"What kinda thing are you?!"

"A human thinks he can stand against us?"

Just as I'd expected, the monsters noticed me, and they charged. I'd wanted to pull off an ambush...but oh well.

"*Water Magic: Ice World*."

"Pitiful. Water magic?"

"I'll eat your head fir—"

Those were the last words they ever said.

The air itself froze, crystallizing the monsters into two statues. That wasn't all—the ice froze the surrounding grass and trees. *Hmm, my spell was more effective than I'd expected. I'll have to watch my output.* Still, the

details could wait.

I ran up to the girl.

“U-Um...”

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

If we stayed here, other monsters would probably come along. I grabbed the girl’s hand and pulled her away from the scene.

We ran for a while and finally stopped in a thicket of trees large enough to hide us.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

The girl nodded. She looked around ten or twelve, had unkempt black hair, and wore grubby clothes. Still, when you looked past all that, she was a cute kid.

“Um...why...did you save me?” she mumbled in a shaking voice.

I didn’t really have *a reason...*

While I hesitated over how to answer, she continued. “The monsters you defeated are part of the army. Their comrades will notice soon. They’ll look for who did it. If that happens...we’ll die...”

Her face was pale. Right, so those monsters were elites of the army.

“Got it. Are the other monsters stronger, by the way?” I asked.

“Apart from the commanders, they should all be about the same, but each squad has more than twenty soldiers. If they attack all at once, we humans can’t hold out...”

“Twenty of those... That should be fine.”

“Huh?” she asked, looking blankly at me. “Um...what do you mean...?”

“Twenty or thirty of those monsters won’t be a problem. I can freeze them all at once.” I spoke as softly as possible, trying not to worry her.

Well, to be honest, we’d probably be fine even against more than a hundred. Noah said that elemental magic was really fierce on the battlefield, and I knew from experience that it excelled against multiple opponents.

“Sir, are you...a hero?” she asked. Her face wasn’t devoid of life like it had been—some light had returned to her eyes. Her cheeks were slightly flushed as well.

Hmm, I must have given her the wrong impression...

"No, I'm not... I'm looking for one, though."

"So you're one of their comrades!" the girl exclaimed.

"By the way, I don't really know the area... Do you know where we are?"

"Huh?" the girl looked up at me doubtfully. She was obviously confused about why I would even ask that. Guess it was a really weird question...

"W-Well, I was actually attacked by a really strong monster before I got here," I explained. "I hit my head, so I don't remember much."

It was a painful excuse, but...she let out a sigh. I didn't know whether she believed me, but she didn't ask any more questions. After all, she *did* owe me her life.

"This is Demon Lord Bifrons's human farm."

That was...a lot to unpack. Suddenly, Ira's comments came flooding back to me. I was supposed to land someplace significant to me. A demon lord... I'd struck the final blow against him in my time, but what's more, I'd *spoken* to him. That was definitely significant.

It seemed like I'd ended up in the Undead King's territory.

Epilogue — Hero Aya's Job

◇ Aya Sasaki's Perspective ◇

"A request for the Hero of Great Keith?" I asked, taking the document from the messenger in the lobby. Currently, we were staying in a hotel in Horn, the capital of Roses.

It'd been around two months since Takatsuki had traveled to the past.

Lu and I had been really down at first, but we couldn't just mope until he got back. That's why we'd tried our hand at a bunch of dungeons and had worked on our skills. More than any of that, we couldn't just stay sad when Princess Sophia—who should be just as upset as us—was working her socks off.

She was the Priestess of Water and was dealing with setting up statues and such for the Goddess Noah at each of the churches—now that Noah had been recognized as the new eighth goddess, she needed idols for her followers to pray to.

Eir had personally told Princess Sophia that since she and Noah got along so well, she didn't mind statues depicting both of them in Roses.

"Hero Makoto...would want that," Princess Sophia had said sadly. She was also currently dealing with casualties caused by monsters, and the revitalization of Laphroaig, so she was doing more than I could manage.

My memories of the past made me look to the future—the next problem we had to tackle was a request from Great Keith. Since I'd won their tournament, I'd become their State-Authorized Hero for a year. As such, I'd expected to get these kinds of requests sometimes.

"You going to take it?" Lu asked. She sounded kind of against the idea.

The messenger cringed at her words. "Y-You might not accept?!"

Lucy shrugged, her hands busy polishing her staff. "Well, you've got Olga."

"Indeed, however... The target this time is a calamity-class monster. It's exceptionally clever, with over a thousand years of experience and

intelligence. Every time it feels Hero Olga's aura, it runs before she arrives. It is also an ancient dragon, so it's too powerful for any other fighter. Adventurers would not be able to stand against it, so..."

The messenger was speaking quickly while wiping away beading sweat. Part of that explanation caught my attention.

"It's an ancient dragon, Lu."

"An ancient dragon..."

We'd gone into Labyrinthos recently and had taken out several land and water dragons. But, we'd never faced an ancient dragon together. It was honestly kind of a scary prospect.

"I understand your concerns," said the messenger. "This ancient dragon is a named monster called the Hell Drake. It is among the most dangerous monsters in the country! However, this request is not to eliminate it, but to repel it—just wounding it somewhat will be enough! Now that Iblis has returned, our army cannot divert its strength from the Northern Front Plan to fight this monster. So...so... Would you deign to take this request...?"

I didn't feel like we could turn it down. *Maybe I shouldn't have become a hero.* My thoughts suddenly jettisoned back to the person who'd become a State-Authorized Hero before me...

What would Takatsuki do? I thought. Immediately, I knew just what he'd probably say.

"Sounds interesting. Let's go, Sasa."

He would definitely say that. There's no way he'd turn down something like this.

"We'll take it," I said.

"Th-Thank you!"

The messenger's crying face was pretty memorable.

"So, we're going off to Great Keith for a bit!" Lu said.

"We'll bring souvenirs, Sophie."

"Lucy, Aya... Fulfill your duties as a hero, but..." She shook her head. "Take things a bit more seriously, please."

We'd come to tell her that we were going to take on the dragon. She was Takatsuki's superior, but that had nothing to do with us. Ultimately, she was our friend, so we thought she should know.

"Are you sleeping okay?" Lu asked her. "Don't follow Makoto's lead

and stay up all night training—he's just a weirdo."

"I'm taking the breaks that I need to," Princess Sophia replied.

"Well, you've got some pretty big bags under your eyes," Lu pointed out. "Your hair doesn't look as good as it usually does either."

"Sophie, lack of sleep is the enemy of beauty. What'll you do if you disappoint Takatsuki when he gets back?"

"I-I know, Aya! That wasn't fair." This was Princess Sophia's private room, so only the three of us were present—that's why I could be so casual. The princess sighed, then said, "Take care, you two. The Hell Drake is bad enough that we've even heard of it in Roses. You might only need to drive it off, but it is a dangerous opponent."

I cocked my head. "It runs away from Olga, though. It can't be that impressive, can it?"

At that, Lu and Princess Sophia sighed heavily.

"Well, she *did* take Olga down in a single hit," Lucy muttered.

"But Hero Olga is the second strongest hero on the continent," said Princess Sophia. "It makes more sense for monsters to run from her than not."

I paused to consider this. "Well, I guess so." Apparently, my common sense wasn't exactly great when it came to this kind of thing.

"Lady Furiae!"

"Saint!"

"Long live the queen!"

Throngs of people were gathered in front of the (currently under construction) Moon Palace. All of them wanted to catch a glimpse of the newly crowned queen of Laphroaig.

"Fuuri's really popular," said Lu.

"Yeah..." I murmured. "Looks like we won't get to see her for a while. Let's come back when she's done."

Lu and I had teleported to Laphroaig. Our former party member was a real big shot now, so we couldn't just turn up and see her out of nowhere.

Since we didn't have anything else to do in the area, Lu and I spent time taking down some of the nearby monsters. This place used to be nothing but wilderness, so way more monsters roamed here than in most countries, and they caused significant problems. We killed a few dozen and then reported

our success to their adventurer's guild.

"Good work, Fuuri."

"You were super popular today, Fuu."

It was nighttime now, and we were in a reception room with the queen. I'd expected her guards to make us wait, but they'd shown us right through.

"Indeed... I'm exhausted. Smiling in front of people is the thing I'm worst at..."

The queen—Fuu—slumped over, wearing a grumpy expression.

"Want something to drink? We brought souvenirs."

"Thanks. I will pass on the alcohol, though. I need to be up early tomorrow... Incidentally, are the two of you facing an ancient dragon alone? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Hmm, well they haven't told us exactly what kind of dragon it is yet," I replied. "We'll get the details in Great Keith."

All I knew was that it was really strong.

"My knight isn't with you...and I'm worried. Perhaps you could take some veteran mages from Laphroaig?" Fuu offered, her tone concerned.

"Nah, we're good. If it looks dicey, we'll just get away with my *Teleport*," Lu said.

"Yup," I chirped. "We don't actually have to kill it." Besides, I'd feel bad taking people away from Laphroaig during its reconstruction period.

"Lady Furiae, I do not think Laphroaig has anyone strong enough to support them," Havel—Furiae's aide—said as he entered with a knock. He must have overheard the conversation.

"What do you mean, Havel?"

"Lady Lucy and Lady Aya gave reports at the adventurer's guild today. The number of monsters they defeated... Well, all the adventurers in our capital put together have not achieved that same number."

"Hm?" Lu and I chimed in unison.

"That can't be right, Havel," Lu replied. "Aya and I only took down fifty or sixty of them. That can't be more than the guild as a whole has killed, can it?"

"Of course not, if you were to include weak monsters. However, the monsters you hunted were all calamity designations or nearly that dangerous. The guild workers were shocked when they heard you took

down twenty griffins and twenty wyverns in a single day."

"Well, we just happened to run into a swarm," I replied. "Usually, we wouldn't get that many."

Havel was normally pretty reserved, but his eyes went wide at that.

"No adventurer would attack a swarm of griffins or wyverns without a plan! They would usually spend days planning! They'd set traps! You two are the only people who could just leap in and defeat them!"

Lu and I exchanged silent glances. Was that praise? It didn't feel like it...

"Therefore, Lady Furiae, they need no support. If anything, our mages would only drag them down."

"I see. A shame. Take care, you two. I'd love to come along with—" Fuu glanced at the blanching Havel. "Don't worry. It's just a joke."

She sure looks like she meant it...

And so, we finished saying goodbye and set off for Great Keith.

"Welcome, Hero Aya! Daughter of Rosalie!"

We'd been planning to book an inn or something, but when we introduced ourselves at the gate, some escorts took us all the way to the castle in a carriage.

"Please, sit."

"Sure."

"Got it."

Once at the castle, we were guided to a fancy-looking reception room. We'd been sitting on the stuffed sofas for about ten seconds when a well-built dude and a guy with an unfriendly face walked in. The latter...was someone we knew.

General Talisker. He was second only to the king, apparently. The other person introduced himself as the leader of the adventurer's guild.

"I am glad to see you both, Lady Aya Sasaki, Lady Lucy J. Walker," said General Talisker. "I apologize for the rush, but allow us to inform you of the situation with the Hell Drake. You—explain." The general gestured to the man beside him.

"Sir! Hero Aya! Lady Lucy! Please, take a look at these documents."

His subordinate handed over the paperwork and began to explain. A bunch of papers were already stuck to the walls, all of them outlining details about the Hell Drake.

“We have gathered all of this information into a separate booklet!”

The booklet was really well organized and easy to understand. Lu and I nodded along as we listened and read.

Being an ancient dragon, the Hell Drake was obviously strong. We also found out that it had caused a great deal of damage to the country over the years. Apparently, it could manipulate volcanoes and cause them to erupt at will. Because of that, settlements near its zone of activity couldn’t really farm, and many villages had been destroyed.

We’ll do our best... This was a lot of heavy information, but it also felt motivating.

After leaving the meeting, we spent the night at an inn. The next morning, Lu teleported us out to where the Hell Drake roamed.

◇ Lucy’s Perspective ◇

“Urgh, *this* is Hell Valley? It’s way too hot!” I couldn’t help but yell.

“Yeah, you don’t handle the heat well. You good?” Aya asked, looking at me worriedly.

We were near the crater of the biggest volcano in the country. The Hell Drake lived in volcanoes... So, yeah, there wasn’t much we could do about the temperature.

“I would’ve gone home if the locals hadn’t already given us stuff to deal with the volcano,” I answered, wiping the sweat out of my face. Because of them, Aya and I were fully equipped for the environment—we were prepared for the heat and fire that would come at us during the battle against this dragon. Still, it was *hot*.

“Is that a landmark, Lu?” Aya was pointing at a little hut made out of rock. It was practically falling apart.

“That’s what we’re looking for. We can’t use it though, can we?”

“If we do, the dragon’ll find us right away,” she replied. “We need to build a base.”

With that, Aya quickly started setting up the heat-resistant tent. I lent her a hand, and very quickly, we had a big tent to sleep in.

“Lu, mana please.”

“Sure!” I placed my hand on the tent and flooded the fabric with mana. It instantly vanished into thin air.

“Wow! *Camouflage Magic*!” Aya exclaimed.

“It really does look like there’s nothing there.”

I could see the faintest outline of the tent, but it was nothing but a wavering impression—from a distance, it would be invisible. The tent was also equipped with cooling magic, so the air inside was nice and pleasant.

We took a quick break to eat a simple meal and then just waited for our quarry to show up. Dragon or not, we didn’t see any monsters at all.

This area was called Hell Valley because it was a lot lower in elevation than its surroundings. It had one other distinct feature—a lake. Water seemed to well up from the mountain tops and flow down, gathering in the lake, which was near our base. Of course, since the climate here was so hot, the water was also much warmer than was typical.

“Whoa! This lake is like a hot spring!” Aya exclaimed.

“A really big one too. It’d be a shame if no one enjoyed it.”

“Let’s take a dip!” Aya suggested, eyes sparkling. She did like hot springs, didn’t she? She’d gone to one with Makoto before...

However, there was one thing I was worried about.

“Are there any monsters swimming in it?” I asked.

“Urk... That’d be bad.”

We thought it over, and eventually, we decided to take some water from the lake and make a smaller pool.

“About this big?” I asked. I’d used my *Ground Magic* to hollow out a hole for the pool and make a little stream connected to the bigger lake.

“Yup, and we can put these rocks here,” Aya said, moving some nearby stones both into the pool and around the edges.

I felt kind of weird doing this in an ancient dragon’s territory...but we’d just get stressed waiting in the tent. That’s why the two of us had made the hot spring—it was a good distraction.

“Done!”

“Yay!”

We high-fived.

“Let’s get in ♪” Aya trilled in a singsong voice. She started stripping down to her skin, and I began taking off my shirt, which had been soaked through with sweat during the hot spring’s construction.

“Hm?” I’d half removed my clothes when I sensed something odd. *Aya and I should be the only ones here.* And yet, I could hear a third set of

breaths.

"Say, Aya... Can you hear anything?"

"Huh? Not really."

Aya had sharp senses. Being a lamia queen meant that they were way more acute than most races. If she hadn't noticed anything, then it was probably fine...

Listen.

We elves also had great hearing, and using that skill made it even better. Makoto had always said that it was best to be completely and utterly aware of your surroundings. I used to leave all of that up to him...but he wasn't here now. So, that responsibility fell on me.

I *Listen*ed carefully for the source of my unease.

"There!" I shouted, pointing at a bit of shimmering air. I summoned my mana and launched a boulder at the spot with ground magic. The boulder collided with something in the air, and I sensed something skittering off.

"Ha ha ha... Not bad for a foolish human."

Suddenly, a massive dragon appeared out of the mirage. The beast's body was half transparent, and it blended in with its surroundings.

It... It's using magic!

"Aya, watch out! That thing can cast spells!"

"Got it, Lu! It was peeking at us! I won't let it get away!"

Aya and I didn't seem to be *entirely* on the same page... "Uh, Aya... Surely dragons don't do that—"

As I spoke, I realized something. Why had it been watching and not attacking? Was Aya *right*?

"Foolish human... I was simply going to attack when you were defenseless, but it seems you have greater instincts than I thought. Still, it will end the same way..."

Ah, all right. It'd been waiting for us to let our guards down.

"You cowardly dragon..." I muttered.

"Wh-What?!" it demanded. *Whoops, it must have heard me.*

"No, Lu. He's just making excuses since we caught him spying! Pervy lizard!"

"How dare you!"

Aya's comments must have *really* made it angry.

Still...I'd originally suspected that this might be the Hell Drake, but that

couldn't be right. It didn't have the dignity that something so long-lived should have. However, the information we'd been given said that there were a dozen or so younger dragons that accompanied the Hell Drake, so this must've been one of them.

"Aya, don't provoke it." I turned to the monster. "So, Mister Peeping Dragon, you can't ambush us now—are you still planning on attacking? If you want to turn tail and run, we'll let you."

"I think you're provoking it more," Aya said with an exasperated look. *Was I?*

"You pitiful mortals will *let* me?! Fools! I will burn you to cinders!"

Below us, the earth began to shake, and the volcano started to belch smoke as if responding to it. The dragon's massive gaping maw started to glow.

Dragon Breath!

It was a special move that strong dragons possessed. If we took a blast from it straight on, it'd ruin our new hot spring...

"You're acting awful high and mighty for a peeping dragon!" Aya yelled angrily. Suddenly, she started shining in a radiant rainbow of colors.

This was *Superstar*, one of Aya's special skills. *Guess she's planning to take it down in a single shot.*

"Die!"

"Hyah!"

Aya rushed forward, her body flying through the air quicker than the dragon could let loose its breath.

Slam! Before I knew what was happening, Aya's punch had blasted a hole right through the dragon's skull. It thudded to the ground without even a final roar.

"I beat the nasty perv!" Aya was smiling and cheering, but...she was completely covered in dragon blood.

That's terrifying...

"Aya, wash yourself up," I said, pulling her along and stripping off the rest of her clothes. Once at the hot spring, I threw her into the water.

"Whoa, it's all red." She began to scrub the rest of the blood from her skin.

As she got cleaned up, I approached the corpse. "Hmm, it's bigger than I thought."

Even if it wasn't an ancient dragon, it'd probably been around for a few centuries—long enough to make a name for itself. Aya had just taken it out like it was nothing, so we hadn't really gotten to see how strong it was.

"Well, we can't leave any evidence... *Store*." Among the supplies given to us by Great Keith was a magic box—at my command, the dragon's body vanished inside.

Great! We're done!

"You come in here too!" Aya exclaimed. She reached out and yanked the rest of *my* clothes off, then pulled me into the water.

"Come on, Aya, you don't need to be so pushy..." I protested. "It *is* nice, though." We'd spent half a day building the hot spring, and it was the perfect temperature. I sat alongside Aya in the water. "Good work with the dragon."

"You were the one who spotted it," she said.

"But you were the one to kill it. We'll need to report its death later."

"We're here for the *ancient* dragon though, not that guy."

"Right. We'll be in trouble if we get attacked now."

"Yeah. After all, I can only use *Superstar* once a day." Her skill was really strong, but she had a limit on the number of times she could activate it.

Even while soaking in the hot spring, I made sure my staff was nearby, and I kept paying attention to our surroundings. If the ancient dragon showed up, I was going to *Teleport* us out.

In the end though, no other monsters showed up.

Three peaceful days had passed since we'd slain the first dragon. We hadn't seen *any* monsters, let alone any dragons. The smoke from the volcano was peaceful too. Essentially, we were bored.

"I peeled some fruit, Lu. Want some?"

"Thanks, Aya."

We were currently relaxing in the cooled tent. As for how we spent the rest of our time...

"Hey, Lu, let's take a dip."

"Again? You sure love hot springs, don't you?" I was kinda exasperated, but we didn't have anything else to do, so I followed her.

She sank into the pool, letting out a sigh, then started splashing around.

“This is the best. Just the best.”

I’d already warned her to keep it down in case we attracted monsters, but this time, I didn’t bother. I just soaked in the water, humming. Though I was still using *Listen*, not a single monster had wandered by. Things really were peaceful. Great Keith had instructed us to retreat immediately if things seemed dicey...but I saw no signs of danger.

Hmm, how long are we going to stay here?

Makoto wasn’t here, so I was the party leader for now. We still had plenty of supplies, but I was considering a quick visit to Great Keith’s capital, Gamelan, to report in.

“You’re frowning, Lu, how come?”

I yelped as she tackled me with a hug. She’d been doing this a lot lately.

“I was trying to decide when we should head back. If nothing shows up, it probably means our plan failed.”

“Well, we can stay until we run out of food. Actually, I’d happily just stay here forever,” she answered, still hugging me. Aya hated the cold and loved hot springs, so this place was pretty much perfect for her...even if it was a bit too warm for me.

“Won’t we get bored of just rations?”

“I’ll cook—it’ll be fine.”

“Well...okay.”

Aya was great at cooking. She even managed to use spices from the Fujiwara Trading Company to turn adventurer rations into something delicious. Because of that, we didn’t have any issues with our food.

She giggled. “Your skin’s so smooth because of all the time in the springs,” Aya murmured, starting to tickle me. She’d been doing this sort of stuff a lot now that Makoto wasn’t here.

Was I just taking his place? Letting her get away with it just didn’t sit right with me.

“Your skin’s all glossy now too,” I teased. “Also, has your chest grown? How leeeewd.”

She yelped. *Guess she didn’t expect a counterattack!*

“See, you just don’t know what to do with yourself without Makoto here.”

I grabbed her, paying her back in full for all the groping she’d been doing to me.

“Hey—Lu, wait. Stop, not th— Hyah!”

“Heh heh heh... I know all your weak spots... Eep!”

I’d gotten a bit carried away—she made me jump by poking me under my arm.

“I know *you* inside out too,” she insisted, flexing her fingers weirdly.

“What, you wanna go?” I asked.

“I’ll finish things this time,” she insisted.

“I’ll show you who’s on top!”

The two of us moved as one, grappling in the water, touching each other, just goofing around.

Honestly...this is a dragon's territory! What are we playing at?

By the time we tapped out, we were both breathing heavily.

"Let's head back to the tent," I suggested.

"Sure."

When we got inside, we rehydrated with some water and cooled down.

"Are you tired, Lu? Why not get some rest?"

"I'm fine. But why don't *you* rest?"

"I guess so. I'll just have a nap." Aya flopped down, and eventually, she started to breathe slowly in sleep.

Quietly, so she wouldn't wake up, I began performing maintenance on my staff. *Listen* was active the whole time, so I was sure not to miss anything.

Time passed quietly in the tent, and soon enough, it was evening.

"Say, Lu..." Aya mumbled absently. *Oh, so she's awake again.*

I turned to face her. "What is it?"

For a while, there was no answer.

"Aya?"

"When... When do you think Takatsuki will be back?"

"I dunno..."

This was the same topic as always. Every time we played around and tired ourselves out, the conversation would turn to this.

"I miss him..."

"Me too," I said, collapsing by her side. Her face was right next to mine, and I saw faint tear tracks running down her cheeks. I said nothing and wrapped her in my arms.

"Lu, I can't breathe."

"Just bear with it," I answered.

I heard her giggle quietly. Still, it wasn't long before she spoke up seriously.

"Lately, I've been having nightmares about everyone dying in Labyrinthos again. It happened again when I was sleeping just now... I've been dreaming about being alone."

"Don't worry. You're like family to me. I'm with you."

"You won't go away somewhere?"

"I won't. I'll be with you my whole life."

She giggled. “That sounds kinda like a proposal.”

Well, now that she mentioned it, it kinda did. *Oh well.* Since I’d already said it, I wasn’t going to take it back.

“I’m not going anywhere, so you don’t need to feel lonely!” I said, trying to play it cool.

“Thanks, Lu,” she replied after a pause, smiling and hugging me back. “But also... You need to let me know if you want to cry too.”

“I won’t cry—I’m fine.”

“And yet you were crying out for Takatsuki while you were training last night.”

“Wha?!” *How did she know?*

“I was awake. You’re not allowed to force yourself to be strong.”

She started stroking my head, and our normal comfort positions were suddenly reversed.

“I know.” I nodded quietly. When she and I got too lonely, we’d cheer each other up. Neither of us would manage alone.

“I’ll take the next watch,” Aya said. “You get some rest.”

“Thanks, Aya. G’night.”

And that was how our day ended.

Several days had passed since then.

“In the end, the Hell Drake never showed up,” I lamented.

“Yeah. The hot springs were fun, though.”

“We weren’t supposed to be there to play.”

The two of us had returned to the capital. We’d been gone for seven days in total, but we’d only seen that one dragon on the first day.

“Hero Aya! Lady Lucy! You’re safe!”

At the castle, the messenger from the other day was there to greet us.

“Unfortunately, we didn’t see the Hell Drake,” Aya said.

“Sorry,” I added.

“Not at all! We were worried when you didn’t return. We are just glad you’re both safe.”

It sounded like the messenger really had been worried about us. Soon, we were shown to General Talisker and the guild leader. We told them that a dragon had shown up on the first day but that the rest of our time had been peaceful.

“Hm... So the Hell Drake didn’t appear?” Talisker asked.

The guild leader sighed. “A shame. We will need to think of another method.” No one looked happy with the outcome. “Incidentally, what did the defeated dragon look like?” Apparently, the guild leader was interested in the materials the dragon could provide—scales, teeth, and so forth.

“We used the magic box to store it. I’ll get it out for you.”

I pushed some mana into the box. The huge corpse suddenly appeared in the area behind the guild that was designed for assessing monsters. A fair number of guild workers had crowded around to watch.

“Here it is.”

“It’s pretty big,” Aya said casually, even though she was the one that’d taken it down.

The general and the guild leader stared at the dragon carcass, acting somewhat dumbstruck. Then, everyone around us began to yell. Aya and I just looked on, puzzled by their reactions.

What’s wrong?

“Why are you all surprised?” I asked.

“It’s just a peeping dragon.”

“I guess dragons that can use magic are rare.”

“L-Lady Aya... Lady Lucy...”

“What?” we asked in unison.

“This *is* the Hell Drake! The dragon you defeated on your first day was the ancient dragon that had been terrorizing the whole country!”

“Huh?”

It was our turn to look shocked.

Well, the Hell Drake was defeated.

Though that statement sounded like it had nothing to do with us, we *had* been the party to kill it. For the next three days and three nights, the capital was awash with festivities.

Aya and I were at the center of it all. We got a commendation from the king—the Hero of Incandescence didn’t look happy at all. Still, when we were deep into the celebration, she threw her arm around Aya and said, “That’s why we’re rivals!” She even mentioned partying up with us at some point, so it looked like she wanted to make friends with Aya.

We kept on adventuring after that. Though we struggled a lot, the two of

us overcame it all. Working together, we gradually gained more and more notoriety, and eventually, we even earned a weird nickname: “the Crimson Fangs.”

Afterword

This is Isle Osaki. Thank you for buying volume nine of *Zero Believers*. The last volume was the standard fantasy battle against the demon lord, but this time, we had a completely different enemy. As far as strength went, this one was the strongest of the lot, and Makoto was in real trouble. Of course, if you've read the series, then I don't have to tell you that it's going to get even more difficult. From this point on, things are going to be *really* tough for him.

The story is reaching its endgame now. In the next volume, the whole cast, apart from Makoto, will be new. We'll have some new heroines as well, and they'll be very charming. This will be the longest arc so far, so I hope you enjoy it.

We're now in the fourth year since I started this series in 2019. I'm truly grateful that I've been able to continue for this long.

I would like to thank Tam-U for the wonderful character and cover illustrations (as always). To Hakuto Shiroi, I want to say that Sasa is wonderful in the manga. S took the lead on editing this time, so thank you as well. Finally, to my readers, I hope you will continue to enjoy *Zero Believers* in the future.

Bonus Short Stories

The Water Goddess's Questions

◇ Goddess Eir's Perspective ◇

"Mako's gone back a thousand years," I said.

"He has," Noah replied.

"My, don't you seem cool with it? Aren't you worried about your one and only believer?"

"My Makoto will be fine."

Sophie's lover Mako had set out on a journey a thousand years into the past, meaning that the Wicked Deity Noah currently had no disciples. Despite that, she didn't seem bothered in the slightest—she was just lounging around in the Seafloor Temple like always.

On the other hand...

"Why?! Why can't I find him?! It's absurd! Don't run away from my *Past Sight*!"

The youngest goddess, Irrie, was ranting and raving. Despite all her abilities, she couldn't take things easy.

"What's up?" I asked her. "He arrived safe and sound, didn't he?"

"He did! So why can't I *find* him?!"

Apparently, she wanted to offer him some support in the past, but Mako was a zealot of the Titanea. Because of his adherence to another faith, we Sacred Deities couldn't give him much help. Even so, Irrie was the Goddess of Fate, so she should be able to detect him by following the slight warping of history.

And yet, she couldn't.

"Wh-What do I do?! If he's dropped dead, then..." She was in a full-on panic, her face pale.

I wasn't *that* far gone, but I was, admittedly, still worried. The monsters back then were strong, and there were many demon lords. Mako was strong

too, but accidents could happen.

"Phwah..." Noah yawned, lying back.

"Hey, Noah, why are you so calm?" I asked. Though we always spoke casually, she was realistically a much higher-ranking goddess than me. As punishment for siding with the demons a millennium ago, she had been stripped of her power and sealed away, and I'd been chosen as her warden. Ever since, I had been with her. At least she was easy to talk to—I thought of her as a friend.

"She'll find him sooner or later." Noah chuckled. "You don't need to worry."

Honestly, even *I* was envious of how beautiful that little laugh made her look. Others said that she was the most gorgeous in the heavens, and even after all these years, her beauty was alive and thriving.

"Are you...planning something?"

"Me, scheming?" she asked with an exasperated sigh. "I'm sealed and have no power, remember? How could I do anything?"

This was a topic we'd discussed many times, and I still had no idea what she was thinking. Since the talk with Noah wasn't going anywhere, I decided to shift the conversation back to Irrie. "Found him, yet?"

"No, I haven't!" she shouted, her voice lacking any of Noah's composure. "I've looked in every nook and cranny of the area where Roses's territory should be, but I can't find him!"

Hmm, if she couldn't find him after looking that thoroughly, then maybe...

"Perhaps he's somewhere else?" I suggested.

"But...he's the Hero of Roses, isn't he? He's spent the most time active in that country."

"That *is* true..."

The pair of us tilted our heads in consideration.

Then, Noah butted in. "Check near Springrogue."

"Springrogue? Mako's barely spent any time there, though."

"There's a strong link between him and the Undead King, along with the demon lord's subordinates."

"Oh." Irrie and I said in unison. Despite the small amount of time he'd been there, his stay *had* been rather meaningful.

"Ah! This might be it!" Irrie cried out. "There're traces of water

elementals being used here!”

Seems like we’ll find him sooner than we thought.

I turned to Noah. “You really know him, huh?”

“Of course I do,” she replied.

She then lay back to nap again, a slight smile gracing her lips.

The Queen of Laphroaig

◇ Furiae’s Perspective ◇

“Lady Furiae! A hundred new citizens have arrived at the capital!”

“Your Majesty! I have a report on the Moon Palace’s reconstruction!”

“My Queen! There is a group of dragons near the capital. We are massing forces to deal with them!”

Laphroaig had been reestablished, and the site of the soon-to-be town was in the midst of preparations for a festival. Problems seemed to crop up every day, but everyone was tackling them proactively.

The reason for all of this was that, up until now, we cambions had not had a country of our own. Now, thanks to the Goddess of the Sun, Laphroaig was officially allowed to become a nation again. Cambions from across the continent were gathering in the area. All of this meant that I—as the new queen—was dizzyingly busy.

I’d never led people before. My knight had risked his life to give me this opportunity though, and I wouldn’t squander the chance to restore Laphroaig. That was precisely why I was throwing myself into unfamiliar work each day.

◇

“I’m exhausted...” After finishing my duties, I sighed, slumping back onto the sofa in my room.

“Good work, Fuu! I made some tea.”

“Being queen must be tough, Fuuri. I brought you some magic fruits that apparently keep your energy up.”

“Why are you both here?”

For some reason, there were two intruders in my room. It went without

saying that they were Aya and Lucy, respectively.

"We came to see how you were doing. Ah, we got permission from Havel."

"Oh! And we dealt with a bunch of dragons and griffins that were rampaging in the country."

Havel was one of my aides. He just let these two pretty much come and go as they pleased. I ignored that part though—the second thing they'd mentioned was much more meaningful to me.

"The dragons only became a problem this morning..." I murmured.

"Yup! We got the request today, so we just went ahead and took care of them," Lucy replied casually.

"We've also got to go back to Great Keith again later," Aya said. "Man, it's annoying..."

I nodded. "Being a hero isn't easy."

Aya shrugged. "Well, I get plenty of money for it... But I'm not carrying on after this year!"

"You're retiring?" Lucy asked. "That's a waste."

"I don't wanna! I'm not being a hero again!"

Aya had become Great Keith's State-Authorized Hero by winning their tournament, and now it seemed like she wanted to give it up. I felt like that would be a shame...but the sentiment was definitely very *Aya*.

"We're off to Great Keith!" Lucy exclaimed.

"Bye, Fuu."

The pair of them reminded me of a storm—they said what they wanted, and then, like a flash of lightning, were gone. They were...easygoing.

Almost like my knight.

As I drifted to sleep in my bed, I reminisced about times past.

◇

"Oh dear... I think I overslept."

It must have been because of the consecutive days of hard work, but I was late to rise—the sun was well in the sky by the time I woke up.

This is bad... I'm sure my tasks are piling up.

That was what I thought as I headed to my office. However, when I opened the door, I was greeted by something utterly unusual. Sitting in the

guest chair, smoothly shifting documents around, was a woman—Princess Sophia of Roses.

"Lady Furiae, Lady Sophia arrived, so I showed her to your office," Havel told me.

Roses was providing support to Laphroaig, since we had only just become a country. Princess Sophia herself was helping me with my duties as queen.

"Havel! You should have woken me immediately when Her Highness arrived! Why—"

"Ah, I said that he should let you rest," said Princess Sophia. "Please don't berate him too harshly."

I had no response for her. Honestly, I *did* feel much better for having gotten more sleep last night.

"Um, well I'll get started too... Wait! You've already done all this?!" Documents that I'd thought would take two days were all neatly piled and done.

"I completed the simple things and collected anything that will need your approval separately, so check those first please."

"Right," I answered after a moment, overwhelmed by her efficiency.

She offered a sudden smile at my confusion. "You'll soon get used to it."

I really didn't feel like I'd ever be able to do what she could. *My knight...your wives are way too skilled...*

I needed to catch up! So, I spurred myself along, setting about my work for the day.

Princess Sophia and the Crimson Fangs

◇ Princess Sophia's Perspective ◇

I was sitting in my private office, and I let out a sigh. *It hasn't even been a month since Hero Makoto left.* I'd thrown myself into my work to distract from my loneliness, but I might have gone at things a little excessively.

"Perhaps I should take a break..."

I picked up some of the snacks from the corner of my desk and took a sip of my cooling tea. Actually, hadn't I eaten these with Hero Makoto that

one time? Ah, I was thinking about him again... This wasn't good. Eir had even told me to avoid dwelling on it too much.

To try and shake off those thoughts, I ended up directing my gaze to the stack of documents I still had to finish. My eyes fell, and as I scanned the page, my attention latched onto a line of text that was of particular concern.

There had been a sighting of a dragon around Orion, the southernmost village in Roses. The village was petitioning the country to deal with it. Apparently, the dragon was beyond the capabilities of the Temple Knights and adventurers in the area. The payment would come from their taxes, and I knew their chief to be a diligent sort, so he was unlikely to try and fleece us.

There was a problem, though...

"We don't have enough people."

Roses had very few knights. And the ones we did have weren't exactly strong. Our adventurers were in a similar position. However, this dragon wasn't an issue we could just ignore.

I was fretting over how to deal with it when something broke my concentration.

"Yoo-hoo! You good, Sophia? Not pushing yourself too hard?"

"We came to hang, Sophie!"

My guards must have heard the commotion—they came bursting in.

"Intruders, Lady Sophia?!"

"No. You are dismissed," I ordered. Then, I turned to the two *intruders*. "Lucy, Aya, I've told you over and over, but please keep the noise down when you *Teleport* in."

"Riiiight!"

"Sorry, Sophie!"

Indeed, the two yells had come from Hero Makoto's former party members.

◇

"Hmm, a dragon?"

"The villagers have gotta be worrying like mad. What do we do, Lu?"

"Take it down, of course!"

"Gotcha!"

Lucy and Aya had come to simply talk with me. With Hero Makoto now gone, they were some of the few people who could understand and share my feelings of loneliness.

I took a brief breath and brought myself back down to earth. “W-Wait just a minute! It’s a dragon!” Just the two of them against a beast like that would be ridiculous. A dragon of that level was normally a job for around three dozen knights.

“It’ll be fine,” Lucy assured me. “Aya’s a hero.”

“W-Well, she is... But still.” Aya’s cute, petite form made it easy to forget, but she’d won Great Keith’s tournament and become their State-Authorized Hero.

“Besides, we took down a few dragons in Labyrinthos,” Lucy remarked.

“What?!”

The two of them are putting themselves in such danger?

“See you later, then.”

“Bye, Sophie.”

Suddenly, the two of them cleared the refreshments I’d prepared and vanished with a *Teleport*, like a lightning flash in a storm.

I chuckled. “They really only answer to themselves.”

Hero Makoto was much the same, and those two had really taken on his influence. As I set about finishing the rest of my work, I felt slightly more relaxed.

◇ Several Hours Later ◇

“We’re back!” Lucy called out.

“Hi again, Sophie.”

When they suddenly popped in again (for the second time today), the sun had dipped completely below the horizon, and night had fully fallen. *They...really* are *abrupt people.*

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Did you forget something?”

Preparation was key against a dragon. If they needed something, I’d use every power I had as a princess to get it for them.

“We dealt with the dragon!” Lucy cheered.

Aya nodded excitedly. “Yeah! We just got done telling the guild, but we figured we should let you know as well.”

I was silent for several long seconds.

"What?" *What are they talking about? They only just got the request, right?*

"Man, that was a piece of cake. Nice one, Aya!"

"Your *Teleport* makes things way easier!"

The two of them were laughing with each other. Later, I'd find out that they really had brought the materials from the dragon back to the guild.

"There anything else bothering you?" asked Lucy.

"We'll take on any long-standing quests!" Aya exclaimed.

Their enthusiasm made me jump...but I knew they were just trying to offer me some help.

"Just rest for today," I told them. "I'll have rooms prepared for you."

"You don't need to worry about that," Lucy said.

"Right, we can all share."

I let out a mixture of a sigh and a laugh. Those two always followed their own whims. The thought of it was enough to make me giggle.

"What's up?" Lucy asked.

Aya smiled. "Sophie's happy now."

"I'll have a meal prepared at least," I said. "We can all eat together."

After that, the three of us talked at length, and I found myself in a far better mood.

"Let us know if you need help," Lucy told me.

"Yup, no pushing yourself too hard, Sophie."

"I will," I assured them with a smile. It felt like it had been far too long since I'd been able to smile freely like this. *It might even be the first time since Hero Makoto left.*

I'm waiting for you.

I'd do my best until he got back. Not alone, but with everyone else by my side.

A Day in the Life of the Pegasus Knights' Commander

◇ Janet's Perspective ◇

I was circling in the skies around the castle. This was technically part of

my duties, but with how peaceful the capital was, it was little different than going for a walk.

A sigh escaped my lips. My thoughts were on the events in the cathedral a few days ago. Makoto Takatsuki—the man I harbored quiet feelings for—had set out on a journey to a distant land. According to the goddess, he wouldn't be able to return...

Even Gerald hadn't been himself since his rival had gone away. He had traveled to a fort in the northernmost reaches of the continent—an extremely dangerous place close to the demon continent. It was all to get himself back to normal.

I didn't have the wherewithal to do even that. However, with Iblis back, the army was on tenterhooks.

Ultimately, my patrol ended up with me capturing a single thief, and that was the end of my day.

◇

"Good even— Lady Janet'h?!"

I had arrived at the establishment Makoto Takatsuki had originally introduced me to, planning to order some dinner. The greeter had grown flustered upon seeing my face, and I gestured for her to relax. I took a seat close to the edge of the area and slowly sipped at my wine.

"Here's your food. Enjoy."

The food sold here was somewhat avant-garde—dishes thought up by an otherworlder. It was tasty...but somewhat dull.

The food was much better last time I was here. Is it because I'm alone?

Absently, I drained my second glass of wine.

"I'm taking the seat," someone said, dropping into the chair next to mine.

I wasn't happy with that—they were disturbing my alone time.

I turned to see who would ignore my position as part of the Ballantine family and intrude on my space. When my eyes met theirs, I found myself shocked.

"G-Grandsage?!"

The strongest mage in the country was sitting right next to me.

"Keep it down. They'll notice."

“R-Right... Um...why are you here?”

She responded as if the answer was obvious. “Because the food is good.”

Well, what I’d wanted to ask was more like, “Why did you purposefully sit right next to *me*?” but the Grandsage was only second in authority to the king and pope, so I couldn’t inquire more openly.

Eventually, a bright red cocktail and a bloody steak were set in front of her. The woman heartily dug in.

“Not bad,” she said when she was done, wiping her mouth daintily. The flush from the alcohol had completely vanished.

“Do you visit this place often?” I asked hesitantly.

“No, this is my first time. The elementalist recommended it, so I decided to see how it was.”

“The elementalist” was how she referred to Makoto Takatsuki... *That man! Did he just recommend this place to everyone he knew?!*

“Still,” she continued, “you seem rather lifeless. Gerald is training in the north, is he not?”

“Well, my brother has his own plans...but I...”

“The water and moon priestesses are rushing around to prepare for when *he* returns. Are you happy just letting time pass?”

I jolted at that. “Do you think Makoto Takatsuki will come back?” *The goddess had said he wouldn’t be able to...*

“He will,” she said simply. There wasn’t a single ounce of mocking in her eyes—she met my gaze steadily and earnestly.

She seems certain he’ll be back...? I didn’t know *why*, but that was how it seemed. *Then this definitely isn’t the time to be moping...*

There were almost certainly meetings being held day and night to strategize against Iblis. Once they had decided on a plan, it would be up to us knights to carry it out.

“There. Your face looks much better now.” She grinned. “Also, I’ve dealt with the payment.”

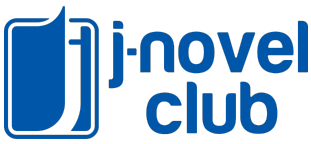
“Huh—?”

Before the syllable had even left my mouth, she’d teleported away.

I stared, gaping. *Did she...come to cheer me up? Came here just for a little girl like me?*

It wasn’t something that someone in such a high position should have

any need to do...but I vowed in my heart that I would live up to her expectations.



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by Isle Osaki

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